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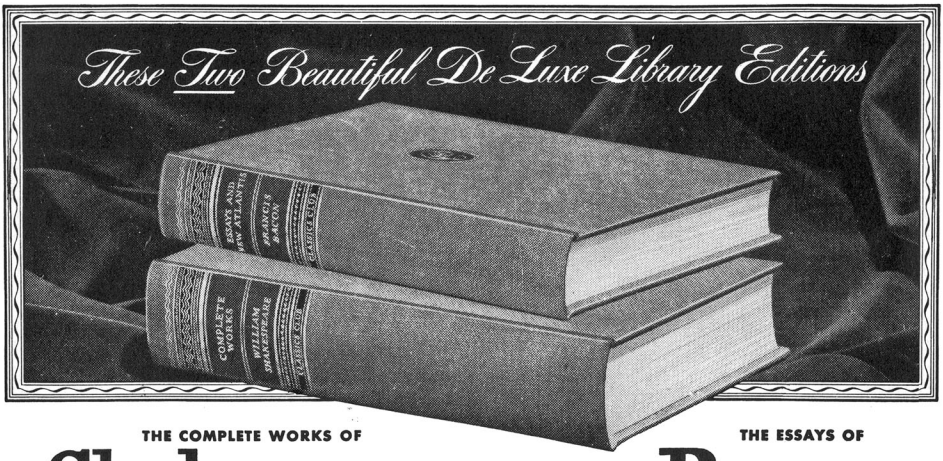

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SUSPENSE

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

INSPIRED BY THE CBS RADIO AND TELEVISION PROGRAM SERIES *SUSPENSE*

Publisher: TOM FARRELL — **Editor: THEODORE IRWIN**
Managing Editor: R. B. WILLIAMS — **Associate Editor: N. R. De MEXICO**
General Manager: ARNOLD E. ABRAMSON — Art Director: FRANC L. ROGGERI
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SUSPENSE Magazine is published quarterly by the Farrell Publishing Corporation at 350 East 22nd St. Chicago, Ill. Editorial and general offices at 420 Lexington Ave. New York 17, N. Y. Tom Farrell, president; A. E. Abramson, vice-president; Paul Thurlow, treasurer; Edwin J. Harragan, secretary. Entry as second class matter applied for at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office and in Canadian Trade Marks office. Spring 1951, edition. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada.

Subscriptions $1.00 a year in the United States and its possessions and Canada. Not responsible for unsolicited material.


The
K. Rice

Can men live without life—die without death—remember without memory? Hurtling through space, these warring generations found the answers!

DEATHLESS ONES

JOHN CHAPMAN and
OLIVER SAARI

Once freed from Earth by atomic energy, the human race threw itself spaceward in a tidal wave that could not be stopped. Exploration and colonization became a crusade. As always, there were men willing to give up their lives and their children's lives for a cause, and they expanded humanity's domain from the farthest side of Pluto to the corona of the sun itself . . . And when that unspent wave rebounded from the extreme limits of the Solar System, the astronomers pointed the way ahead. At Tau Ceti, less than eleven light years away, they found another whole system of planets!

—from "Man's Destiny: a History of Exploration," Volume III

MARTHA CHANNING felt a queer sense of loss as she watched the children doing calisthenics in the metal-walled gymnasium. It was sad to see them growing up. Although it was five years since the Captain's order stopping births, she would never get used to the idea that the Ship would in time become a childless world.

Freckled little Jeff Hendrix, age five, was her favorite. She smiled as from the corner of her eye she saw him soberly going through the same routines as the bigger boys and girls.

When the exercises were over and the children ran screaming and laughing into the companionways leading to their various homes, little Jeff remained. There was something on his mind.

"Aunt Martha, what's a baby?"

Martha Channing blushed. It was not an unfamiliar question after forty years of teaching—ten on Earth and thirty on the Ship—but here she could only answer in the abstract, which embarrassed her. She countered with a question.

"Where did you hear of a baby?"

"Jimmy called me one because I cried when I fell."

"Well," said Martha, "a baby is a small child. A very small child. Smaller than you."

"But there isn't *anyone* smaller than me."

"There were," said Martha. "You were a baby yourself, just a little while ago. You're growing all the time and soon you'll be a man like your father—and your grandfather, the Captain."

"Will I be bigger than Jimmy?"

"Jimmy is growing, too," said Martha, smiling.

She wanted to explain about real babies on Earth, and about the sunshine, rain, birds, trees, grass, mountains this little boy would never see; but the Manual advised against trying to get the children to visualize such things. The Manual preferred tales having to do with the Ship: *Little Larry's Trip to No-Weight, Tommy's Hydroponic Garden, The Little Captain.*

Martha sometimes wondered how well the careful psychological training outlined in the Manual would see them through the years ahead, now that things were going to be—different.

"Tell me a story, Aunt Martha," said the boy.

She took his hand and they walked out of the gymnasium and into one of the empty classrooms. The emptiness gave Martha a small sense of panic. She had to get used to the idea that it was going to be that way permanently, soon.

From the floor of the room protruded a round metal cover, perhaps four feet in diameter. Martha undid the catches and moved it aside to reveal the glass beneath.

They gazed downward, spellbound, like a fortune-teller and her subject peering into a crystal. Under the glass, in countless numbers, were stars. Martha always thought of them as reflections in a clear pool. They moved past that little window much faster than any seen from Earth. Bright Sirius came into view, passing directly below and out of sight in half a minute, trailed by Betelgeuse, Aldebaran and the Pleiades, almost lost in the profusion. The Milky Way wound past like smoke.

"I'll tell you a story about a place called Earth," said Martha. She thought, perhaps the Manual wasn't to be followed so rigidly any more, now that there weren't going to be any more children. The Manual didn't cover a situation like that.

"E'th?" said little Jeff. "I've heard Daddy and Grandpa talk about it. Jimmy Ryan says he's *been* there!"

Martha smiled, shaking her head gently.

"Jimmy must have been thinking of another place," she said. "Earth is far away and *outside* the Ship, just like those stars. And there everyone walks around on the outside, with their feet sticking up—"

"Don't they fall off?" asked the child, big-eyed.

"No," said Martha, not knowing how to explain. "There it's *down* for them *into* the Earth, and the stars are up above." Somehow it didn't seem very logical, even to her. She went on rapidly:

"There green food-plants grow right out of the 'ground'—that's what the Earth floor is called—instead of in tanks. There's only one light globe, and that's far, far away, but it's so big and hot that it lights and warms the whole Earth, and hides all the stars. . . ."

"You mean covers 'em up?" queried the little boy, puckering his forehead.

Martha groped for words, then suddenly clasped the little boy in her arms and held him tight to her breast.

She wanted to make time stand still.

DR. FELIX BREMMER sat nervously fingering his portfolio as Ryan, the Senior Astrophysicist, stood up to give his periodic report. The atmosphere in the domed, cornerless room was queerly tense.

"...radial velocity nine thousand eight hundred four miles a second relative to Tau," Ryan was saying in a low voice. "Deceleration Day one hundred seventy-five years and sixteen days, with a possible error of plus or minus fifteen days. Study of Tau's system has confirmed an Earth-like world approximately fifty million miles from the luminary, and. . . ."

Bremmer eyed Ryan from under lowered lids, almost desperately looking for some sign of senile decay.

THE AUTHORS: *The space-ship saga has become a literary form in its own right, like the sea novel or sonnet—a major contribution of the science-fictioneer to the architecture of expression. Few ships plying the ether lanes of science magazines, however, carry cargoes of such tenseness—and of such great implication to earthly readers—as the ambitious juggernaut launched in this story by two authors from Milwaukee.*

John Chapman is a science-fiction fan turned writer. Oliver Saari is an author who, for thirteen years, was married to his work, then this year decided to try a woman, likes it, thinks he'll keep it that way. The inspiration for The Deathless Ones *came to them over a hot poker table at a science-fiction convention. It was worked out in the course of a series of poker sessions which are the only major obstacle to Saari's second (or ordinary-type) marriage.*

Ryan was the oldest Elder: ninety-two. Thirty years before, at take-off, his beard had been streaked with gray. Now Ryan was clean-shaven, as if ashamed because his whiskers grew in black.

The two-score Elders wore expressions of impatience as Ryan concluded his report. Bremmer could see them stealing apprehensive glances at his portfolio.

They all know what the answer is. How could anyone miss it?

". . . energy for synthesis averages seventy-one per cent above the expected mean—" Now it was the Senior Physical Chemist speaking. "Atmospheric purification on, fifty-two per cent. Mono-potassium phosphate. . . ."

What would the Planners do with such figures, Bremmer asked himself. The men who worked out the Plan had spent twelve years calculating, experimenting, imagining every possibility. Careful testing had been done under simulated conditions on the System's more isolated colonies. *And all of it useless because of one thing the Planners couldn't have foreseen!*

One by one the various specialists reported on their individual researches. ". . . Our community is entering a culture-crisis state," said Kirsten, the Senior Ecologist. He was a small, retiring man, with a constant air of apology.

"You are all aware," he went on, "of the delicately balanced, self-regulatory arrangement which was designed for our nature-culture-personality whole. Our natural environment is unalterable. None of the droughts and pestilences that have endangered earthly cultures; but no room for expansion, either. Our supply of energy is not dependent on the sun. It is fixed at the quantity we brought along; no more, no less. Our hydroponic facilities will supply food as long as the radiant energy and the chemicals are supplied them. The chemicals themselves are obtained from waste products with added expenditures of energy. . . ."

"Dr. Kirsten," broke in the Captain. "This is a repetition of your report last month. Haven't you any adjustments to suggest?"

Kirsten characteristically threw up his hands, palms outward. He glanced with agonized appeal from one to the other of the assembled scientists, as if looking for an ally.

"It's a question of energy," he said. "If we could only tap the drive—"

"Not a chance," broke in the Senior Physicist. "We can't handle third level energy in anything but the reaction tubes."

"In that case," said Captain Hendrix, standing up and leaning heavily on his knuckles, "I think we'd better turn our attention to the Bremmer report."

BREMMER felt all eyes turned toward him as he fumbled with his papers. "Friends," he said, "thirty years doesn't seem so long to a scientist, especially in an environment like

this, where one day's just like the next. . . ."

A rustle of impatience. Perhaps the others preferred bluntness.

Bremmer went on, speaking slowly. "Most of you volunteered for this trip, as much to continue your researches in peace as to help in the undertaking itself. None of us expected ever to see the goal as anything but a distant reddish star; but we were content to have made the start.

"Remember how proud we were five years out when we hadn't had a single death? Not much work for me or the other doctors! People sick seemed to get well without any aid from us. Our population swelled. It was allowed to surpass the planned mean of two thousand because we felt there would be ample opportunity for eugenic control in a two-hundred-year voyage.

"Then the ten-year stage. Many of you had reached your seventies and sixties then. Your wives and children had become thoroughly acclimated to the ship. The educational and physical training programs had proved adequate for the ship-born. We were a happy community—and certainly healthy.

"But after twenty years our population stood close to the three thousand mark. Among us were more than a thousand persons past seventy. Children were maturing normally, but adults were not. Many of us should have been dead of old age! Still we read, in the signs of our glowing health and virility, a boon to our purpose, a sign that everything was well. Many isolated, ecologically-controlled communities in the Solar System had experienced similar lengthening of life spans, a condition always attributed to ideal environments."

Dr. Bremmer paused, looking slowly from face to face. All eyes were staring at him.

"It wasn't until five years ago—twenty-five years out from the System—that the Captain ordered births stopped. Our population had swelled to thirty-five hundred men, women and growing children. All but two of the fifteen hundred adults who had started the voyage were still alive—and those two had died accidentally.

"We knew, then, of course, that something unnatural was happening. Possibly the sun, the giver of life, is also the giver of death—and we had taken ourselves beyond its reach.

"But whatever the reason, we are faced today with an inescapable fact: we adults are not growing older."

At this there were several sharp intakes of breath among those assembled. They aren't really surprised, thought Bremmer; they've been seeing it in each other's faces for a long time.

He scattered his sheafs of paper over the table.

"There it is gentlemen.—A detailed account of the research. It adds up to this—

"No one on this ship is going to die of old age."

Bremmer's voice was drowned in the excited babble from the assembly. Everyone was talking at once, shouting, querying.

"Gentlemen!" shouted Captain Hendrix above the confusion. "Let's face this thing intelligently!"

Gradually the room hushed. Bremmer remained standing, facing Hendrix, noting suddenly that the Captain's shoulders drooped a little and his face was white under the sunlamp tan.

"This ship," said the Captain slowly, grimly, "was built and supplied to support a mean population of two thousand men, women and children for two hundred years. It has low-level energy supplies sufficient to support that population until we reach our goal. It has *not* the supplies to turn back and reach Earth without refueling."

He raised his voice. "Soon we'll have a population of thirty-five hundred adults. That's an effective overpopulation of over a hundred per cent! Under normal consumption, our energy will last perhaps eighty years; with stringent rations, perhaps a hundred and ten. *What are we going to do about the remaining sixty years required to reach our destination?"*

"Dr. Bremmer seems to have figured everything out," said Ryan sarcastically. "Suppose we ask him what we *can* do about it."

"Let's refrain from personalities," said the Captain sharply. "This involves all of us. It's a question of whether something can be done before we're hopelessly under-supplied."

"Why don't we ask for volunteers to—uh—" faltered Ryan, flushing a little.

"Will you be first?" asked Bremmer. "Who will volunteer for death when he can have eternal life?"

No one spoke. They're all secretly glad, thought Bremmer, even if it might mean the end of the expedition. It was ironic. If the Planners had only known, they could have sent a smaller ship with a smaller crew to Tau much faster. This property of deathlessness in interstellar space could become the open portal to the stars—*if the Ship got back to the System to tell about it!*

SURE . . . and that's why I came along," said old Ned Walker. "I figured, what's the sense of raising a family who'd spend their lives mining uranium on Io? Might as well give them a real future—something big. So I joined up."

The faces around him were bored. It was fifteen years since they had heard rumors about the famous "Bremmer Report"—twenty years since births had been stopped. Boredom was nothing new.

Their eyes were on the pocket of Ned's shabby jacket. He knew they'd listen to him as long as they could see the bulge of the flask there. When he was well into his story, he'd give them a little nip of the forbidden stuff. Not everyone had a son who

worked in Chemical Synthesis.

"How about a little nip, Ned?" said one of then, licking his lips. He, too, was one of the original crew—a welder. He hadn't welded anything for twenty years.

Ned Walker shook his head. "Later, Bill, later." His eyes were a little misty. Funny how the old days kept coming back to him. He'd lost count, but knew it was something like forty-five or fifty years. A man ought to forget anything that happened that long ago.

It had been good living, even on the Ship, in the early days. Every man had work and could do what he wanted with his pay. A man could use it to drink with, gamble with, or to buy nice things for himself and his family. A man could have a family! There were kids running around and playing games and scrapping in the corridors. Sometimes a man could even carouse a little.

Now there was—nothing. Why gamble for money that couldn't buy anything? How could a man keep peace in the home, when the kids were grown up and had to live with you for lack of space, and hated you for not dying?

Ned had lost his taste for story-telling. He took the bottle out of his pocket, took a deep drag, and passed it into eager hands.

"What do you s'pose is going to happen?" Bill said. "Seems to me things can't go on this way much longer."

"All I can say, we're all in the best of health in spite of the rationing," Ned Walker said.

"That's the trouble," said the burly man roughly. "How old are you, Walker?" He was one of the middle generation, one who still had childhood impressions of Earth, forty-five years ago.

"Ninety-five, ninety-six—I dunno," said Walker.

"'Ninety-six,'" mimicked the burly man. "Look at you—fat as a baby, black whiskers. You ain't what they call an 'old man' on the microfilms. But you ought to be."

"My kid says nobody's going to die," said another man furtively. At least not natural."

"You suppose this stuff about the rationing being temporary is all hokum?" said the burly man uneasily. "Suppose the Captain's putting something over on us? Supposin' nobody dies?"

Clammy worms crawled along Ned Walker's spine. That was a question he'd asked himself many times, and it made him feel—unnatural. Deep in his heart he knew. Few if any had expected to be alive after forty-five years.

There was a commotion in the corridor outside. A dozen-or-so Juniors crowded in at the door. They were tall well-built lads clad in the simple two-piece garments decreed by rationing; but their faces were ugly, full of hidden malice.

"It's just a bunch of Fogies. *They* wouldn't know anything," said the leader, a tall, bucktoothed youth.

Ned Walker's muscles tensed. There was a stirring, a tightening of lips among the Elders, a rising pulse of excitement. This was a bunch of Juniors from a town on the far side of the Ship. There had been rumors of trouble; some Elders had been beaten up by similar gangs.

"What you want?" he asked tensely.

"Bet *you'd* like to know," said the bucktoothed one insolently.

Ned clenched his fists, a cold rage rising slowly within him. Some of these youngsters were getting too sassy to stand. Why, back on the Io colony—Ned closed his eyes and shook his head as a horrible wave of nostalgia swept him.

"You got him paralyzed, Tusk," sneered one of the youngsters.

"Let's go," said another. "We aren't looking for trouble with the Fogies. Let's go find Ryan and—"

"Shut up," hissed the one called Tusk, whirling.

Ned noticed the first youth, who had been standing behind Tusk. It was his grandson. The boy averted his eyes and crowded through the door. Tusk wheeled and surveyed the Elders with hate-filled eyes; then he, too, went out the door.

"What're they up to?" asked Bill, looking at Ned uneasily.

Ned rubbed his chin gently. "I dunno," he said at last.

He didn't want to think about it.

BREMMER felt the weight of every one of his ninety-three years as he looked around at the regular monthly assemblage of councilmen. His weariness was reflected in the faces of the others. Years of grappling with a seemingly insoluble problem had taken their toll—even in a group where the processes of age had no more meaning. The men were tired. They lacked interest even in their own fields.

Captain Jeffrey Hendrix, unable to hide the fatigue in his face, spoke up vigorously enough.

"Of course you're wondering why we continue to meet when we have nothing to talk about," he said. "The reason is simply our obligation to the Planners, and to any Earthmen who may attempt interstellar voyages in the future."

Hendrix glanced around the room half expectantly and said, a glimmer of hope in his tone, "We will hear any voluntary reports."

Bremmer stood up. "I have a death to report," he said simply, and there was an immediate purr of voices throughout the assembly. Death had become a magic word.

"Peter Kovacs, a senior storekeeper, died of injuries received in a Rec Hall fight in Useless town," Bremmer read from his notes. "A group ganged up on him when he refused to pay a gambling debt."

There was an audible sigh from the councilmen.

"We won't get rid of many that way," said Ryan sarcastically, "unless we can encourage gambling. Why didn't he pay?"

"The report says he gambled without sufficient credit to cover his risks. When he lost, he said it didn't matter whether he paid or not because nobody could do anything with the money anyway."

"Just what I've said all along," sneered Ryan. "Our contrived system of economics hasn't any meaning any more. It's just another source of trouble. I don't see why we had to have it at all."

"We had to have it," said Captain Hendrix gently, "so those who settle the new colony would know what economics was."

"There'll be no colony," said Ryan. "Unless we get rid of part of our population."

Bremmer looked at him. "Any suggestions?"

"We've been over that a thousand times," Ryan said bitterly. "We've argued about getting rid of the Juniors and the Useless Ones and the non-scientists and even the Elders, but the answers are always the same. We're afraid of upsetting the balance of specialists needed for the colony. We can't tamper with family ties. We've got to maintain our basic social structure for the remainder of the voyage. But worst of all, we can't summon the nerve to walk up to a fellow man and tell him he's got to haul his hide to the nearest airlock."

"I say throw out Walker's crowd of Useless Ones," broke in the Senior Chemist. "There must be more than a thousand of them by now—with nothing to do."

"It would be better," said Dr. Kirsten, the ecologist, "if we *gave* them something to do."

"Whether they realize it or not, many of them will be needed on Tau," said Bremmer.

As he had many times before, the Captain changed the subject. "Have there been any more—er—volunteers?"

"One since the last meeting," said Bremmer, "making a total of sixteen. It takes nerve to walk out a lock . . ." he added, his voice trailing off.

"Suppose we offer a worthwhile sum to the family of any volunteer," suggested Ryan.

"No," said the Senior Economist flatly. "Things are already inflated. Why make it worse?"

In the back of the room, someone said, "We should legalize murder."

There was a stir.

"Gentlemen, please—" began the Captain.

Ryan jumped to his feet. "What difference does it make—suicide or murder? It's death you want, isn't it? Why do we balk at technicalities? Haven't we been practicing infanticide right along?"

"There's no place for murder in the Plan," said Captain Hendrix.

"Nor a state of deathlessness," said Ryan, "but we've got it just the same."

"There'll be riots soon," said the Senior Physicist. "People have been learning too much about the deathless condition by rumor. We should announce the facts."

"That's being contemplated," said the Captain, "and we're forming police units to handle uprisings."

"I hear the Juniors are banding together," said the Senior Chemist.

"Get rid of them before they give us trouble," advised another voice.

"Gentlemen—" said bald Dr. Kirsten feebly.

The Captain rapped for order. "Yes, Doctor?"

Kirsten stepped forward, spreading his hands. "Gentlemen, you must realize our culture is entering the advanced stages of a crisis. And as inhabitants of an inflexible environment, we have no physical means of correction at our disposal—"

Ryan slammed the table. "Words, words—what do we do about all the people we can't keep?"

"Dr. Kirsten," said the Captain, "you don't seem to realize we face disaster. We must concern ourselves with measures to solve the central problem—*now.*"

Dr. Kirsten shook his head as he retreated. "There are no such measures," he muttered.

"WHAT'S DEATH, anyway?" asked Jimmy Ryan III of the crowd of Juniors gathered around him at the rear of the Rec Hall. A murmur rippled through the group.

"Most of our lives we've been hearing about death—a thing that doesn't even seem to exist on the Ship. Why is it so important? Is it so terrible the Elders are afraid of it? Didn't history teach us that death is a commonplace, everyday occurrence on Earth? Haven't men been dying for countless centuries?"

His strident tones rang clearly throughout the small room. A stocky, somewhat ungainly figure, he waved his arms peremptorily as he spoke, pausing now and then to brush a lock of thick black hair from his eyes. At twenty-two, Jimmy Ryan was renowned for his aggressiveness among the Junior elements; he was a natural leader.

Close to the rear of the crowd, young Jeff Hendrix watched apprehensively, arms folded across his chest, feet set apart. He felt the tide of emotion swelling in the men around him as Ryan spoke.

"I say the Elders are the ones who should be asked to leave. They've always lived with the idea of death—they know what it means. And if there had been no deathless condition on the Ship, wouldn't they have been the first to go?"

A cheer swept the gathering. Jeff Hendrix stood still, his eyes on Ryan. When the voices died down, Ryan paused, looking slowly from face to face, letting the lull amplify the impact of his words.

"Who are we?" he asked simply, lowering his tone. "Have you ever given any thought to that question? I'll tell you what we are. We're Earthmen who were never meant to see Earth. We're an infinitely small part of a gigantic scheme to colonize some insignificant, far-off planet—

another place we weren't meant to see. Our lives are completely bound by the Ship. This is our home—the only home we'll ever have. It's more our home than it is the Elders'. Yet if we let them, the Elders will put us out. Are we going to stand by and wait for that to happen or are we going to see that things are handled the right way?"

"You tell 'em, Jimmy!"

"We're with you, boy!"

"That's it—throw out the Elders!"

The shouts spread like flames through the group. Ryan grinned crookedly at the response.

"Every person over eighty goes out —and if necessary, by force!"

Again the tumult, and Ryan held up his hand.

"No," said Jeff Hendrix clearly above the falling hush, and immediately all eyes were on him. "It won't work, Jimmy. Murder won't solve anything."

"Well," mused Ryan malignantly, "if it isn't the Little Captain. Something morally wrong with saving our skins, Hendrix? Or are you afraid of breaking up a happy family?"

"Not at all," said Jeff coolly. "If the problem's to be solved, plenty of families will be broken up. But I'm saying we shouldn't be hasty. Sure we've lived all our lives on the Ship. But for that reason we can't expect to have the wisdom and the insight of the Elders. They've lived on Earth and we haven't. I say they are far better equipped to handle the problem, and force is one thing that won't help them!"

Ryan scowled. "They've had close to twenty years to solve the problem. What have they done?"

Jeff had to wait for the shouts to die down before he could reply. "They've done everything that could be done. And they're still trying to find the right answer—in a peaceful way!"

"Yaaaahhhh, he's the Captain's grandson!" snarled a voice.

"Let 'im go with the Elders, Jimmy!" said another.

"The school teacher's got him full of crazy ideas!"

"Quiet!" shouted Jimmy Ryan, and the noise ceased abruptly. "Look, Hendrix. Peaceful or not, something's got to be done. The way I see it, there's no problem to taking over the Ship." He raised his voice again. "People have to eat, don't they? Well, there're four hydroponics aboard, a central one and one for each of the three towns. All we have to do is grab that central garden and we can start dictating our own terms. Maybe we're shy on guns and clubs but we've got plenty of manpower and everybody's young. How about it, Juniors, can we do it?"

His last words were drowned in a fury of excitement. "No!" yelled Jeff to deaf ears. He began shouldering his way forward but was tossed back by an anonymous jab. He recovered just as a voice was heard to say:

"What about the Little Captain, Jimmy? Gonna let him run to the

Elders with the whole story?"

The din vanished again at Ryan's signal. "Wouldn't help things at all," Ryan said slowly, "if we had a squealer around."

"Don't go through with this, Jimmy," said Jeff, breathing deeply. "You'll upset the Plan. Don't forget we're obligated to the Plan just like everyone else—"

"The devil with the Plan," somebody said. "What about us?"

"Let's get him before he talks, Jimmy!" yelled a voice close to Jeff's ear.

"He'll tip off the Elders!"

"Dump him overboard!"

Jeff Hendrix felt the pressure of youthful bodies. A strange lust came into the ring of faces around him—lust born of the curiosity to *see* death —*his* death. Fingers reached out for him and hot breath touched his face.

He struck two or three blows before his arms were pinned.

He was hopelessly outnumbered.

MARTHA CHANNING locked the door of the tiny office and dropped the key from nerveless fingers. She threw herself on the cot. Blood pounded in her temples.

"It has been determined that the longevity amounts to virtual immortality," the announcer had said, over the emergency loudspeaker from Control.

Gradually the familiar walls of the cubicle closed about her; she drew some comfort from them. This was her home, where she had lived since the schoolrooms had been converted to living quarters. Here she dreamed of what once had been. This was the storeroom for her treasured but dimming pictures of Earth, of children.

"One hundred sixty years . . . *one hundred sixty years!*"

Martha tried to drive the awful meaning of that expanse of time from her mind, but it would not go. In one hundred sixty years of sameness the last of the memories that made life worth living must fade, even as they were now fading. Memories of children. Martha had never married because—long ago on Earth —something had happened. She had almost forgotten what. But she had concentrated all her love on children with the soul of a true teacher. It had been the thought of all those children to be born out here among the stars that had *compelled* her to join the crew of the Ship.

As she grew more calm in the familiar surroundings, Martha could hear the loudspeakers again, their metallic voices sounding far away in the little room:

". . . All persons not carrying the special G permit are confined to quarters. . . . Unauthorized persons found in the corridors will be subject to punishment. . . ."

Vaguely she was aware of other noises: of running feet, shouting voices. They were meaningless to her. Nothing that happened could compare with the immensity of time that spread before her. Could she shut herself up in this little room for

a hundred and sixty years? How long till the memories it contained, her very life and sanity, seeped out through the metal walls to be lost in the immense gulf of space?

She tried to relive that moment, fifteen years ago, when she had showed little Jeff Hendrix the stars and tried to tell him about Earth. It sometimes seemed to her that from that moment there had been no children on the Ship.

The loudspeaker blared again. It seemed to be growing louder, more urgent.

". . . Repeat Captain's orders: all unauthorized persons are confined to quarters. Armed mutiny has broken out in several sectors. Reserve police —arm yourselves and report in pattern two-four. Center of the revolt is in the upper three levels of sector seven, where some casualties have been reported. Among known dead are Jeffrey Hendrix III and—"

Martha knew she must have fainted, because she didn't hear the other name at all. Jeff Hendrix killed! Little Jeff, the last little boy. Killed by other boys.

It would have been better if she could have cried. But her eyes were dry as she stared at the ceiling.

She rose from the cot. Outside, the sounds had stilled; even the loudspeaker was quiet. Perhaps the mutineers had taken over the Control station.

Martha picked up the key and let herself out of the room.

The door opened into a classroom —the same classroom in which she had pointed out the stars to Jeff. It didn't seem so long ago now.

Her head was swimming a little and blood pounded again in her ears, but she walked resolutely through the room and into a deserted corridor. It ended in a metal door.

She thought of a bridge, high and graceful, arching over a bottomless black sea. A sea with stars. She saw herself there, leaning on the rail, a young girl dressed in white.

And still, somehow, she was conscious that she was opening the door. Beyond it was a small chamber, and another door. Only a little longer now. . . . Her hands fumbled at controls. . . . She felt the wind, and leaped outward.

THE LOUDSPEAKER crackled in the Control room ceiling.

"Station 3 reporting," it said to the little ring of men. "Junior force flanking the Elder garden, attacking first defense lines in force. We're holding."

The crackling cut short. No one moved. All were counting the minutes until the next report, wondering what it would be.

That was the way the Captain had ordered it. Scientific personnel—the "nucleus" of the expedition—had to sit out the fighting in the safety of the bridge, while hastily recruited police units braced themselves against Junior thrusts on lower levels.

A frustrating way to fight, thought

Bremmer, but the Captain had no choice. His prime obligation was still to the Planners.

"Station 2," said the speaker abruptly. "The force trying to gain entrance to the main lift has been turned back. We have a few arrow and sling casualties. Details to follow."

"Arrows and slings!" scoffed Captain Hendrix, pacing the floor. "On a ship powered by the atom, we fight with arrows and slings!"

Dr. Kirsten spread his hands. "We owe much to the Planners," he said calmly, "for sealing the weapons until the end of the journey."

The Captain scowled. "They might have left something for Control!"

"My only hope," sighed Dr. Bremmer, "is that they don't improvise gunpowder before we do."

Ryan, still trying to reconcile himself with the fact that his grandson was leading the Junior revolt, forced a smile. "You forget," he said, "that we've been wanting people to die, and now they're dying. Does it matter whether it's gunpowder or arrows or the nearest airlock?"

Bremmer closed his eyes and put his hands to his temples.

Fifteen years without an answer. And now a battle that threatened to throw the entire society—such as it was—into chaos.

"Station Three," blared the speaker. "They've got a corner of the garden. Reinforcements requested."

"If we lose our garden," said the Captain grimly, "we're done for."

Ryan jumped up, eyes blazing. "Here we sit like fools while everybody in Useless town is giving us the laugh. Why don't we force them to fight? Why do we let them go untouched?"

"They won't fight," said the Senior Physicist.

"They've locked themselves in their sector," said the Captain. "They want to make sure nobody starts a war with them."

"The Useless Ones are crazy," said the Senior Chemist. "Better we forget them."

There was a brief silence while the Captain paced nervously.

"Station Six. Force of about sixty-five trying to break into our corridor. We're ready."

The Captain, who had paused and cocked an ear, resumed his pacing.

"Station Three. We're holding. Heavy casualties both sides."

Why did it have to happen this way? Was it the only way out? Why couldn't we think of something—in fifteen years—

Ryan made a shrill, indefinable sound. He kicked his chair aside and started for the exit.

"Where are you going?" demanded Hendrix.

"I don't care what you say, I'm going to *fight!*" shouted Ryan as he stumbled, fists clenched, into the corridor.

Hendrix made a gesture as if to follow, but was interrupted by the speaker.

"Station Three. We're holding, but that's all. The garden's taking a beating."

Hendrix threw a switch. "Try to contact young Ryan again. Ask for a truce so we can talk things over."

The terse reply came back: "That's one of your standing orders, sir. We've tried for hours. No luck."

The Captain remained before the panel, arms limp at his sides.

Bremmer felt he should say something—opened his mouth—shut it helplessly.

Why have we failed? What did we do wrong? What should we have done that we didn't?

"Station Six," droned the speaker. "They're still trying to break in."

The Captain touched the panel controls again. "Station Three," he said, "what are your casualties? Please list your casualties."

A long silence passed.

"Station Three," repeated the Captain briskly, "what are your casualties? This is Hendrix. Do you hear me?"

Dr. Bremmer took a deep breath and got up from the table. He walked slowly out of the room. From the corridor he heard the Captain's exhausted tones: "Do you hear me, Three? This is Hendrix. This is Hendrix. . . ."

OLD Ned Walker was sitting cross-legged on the floor, gazing moodily at the panoramic drift of stars outside the circular port, when Bill came in.

"They want a meeting, Ned," said Bill.

"Who's they?" growled Ned.

"Everybody in town. They want you to talk to 'em."

Old Ned wet his lips. "What's wrong?"

"They're worried about the fighting up-level. They think it's crazy and they don't want to have anything to do with it, but what if things don't happen to go right? What if the Captain's thrown out? What if somebody up there decides they want our garden too? Besides, folks are starting to go bats around here—penned up like cattle, without a thing to do. And they've been hearing rumors about how that teacher killed herself because she couldn't stand a hundred and sixty years—"

"Can't help you," broke in Old Ned. "There ain't a thing anybody can do except eat and sleep and wait. Things'll take care of themselves sooner or later."

"You think it'll be like that, Ned?"

"Sure I do. Too many people around, ain't there?"

Bill knelt by the rim of the port. His voice took on a note of anxiety. "Better come, Ned. Somebody's gotta talk to those people or sure as anything some of 'em are gonna start walking out the locks."

"Well, that's one way," muttered Ned.

"Come on, Ned. You're the boss. You're the one everybody looks up to."

Old Ned shook his head. "Nothing I can do. Sure—I could tell 'em there's nothing to worry about, but nobody'd believe me."

They were silent for a minute.

"Sure is a lot of stars," said Ned. "Funny," he added, "I used to think forty years ago it'd be awful nice to live long enough to see other systems —like Tau Ceti."

"Everybody's waiting out there, Ned—"

Old Ned didn't answer. He just glowered.

After a minute Bill said, "What you figure on doing, Ned?"

"I ain't figuring."

"Just gonna sit here?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

Bill heaved a sigh. "Sure wish you'd talk to 'em."

For the first time, Old Ned raised his head. "Got nothing to say," he snapped. "Why don't you leave me alone?"

Bill opened his mouth to speak, then all of a sudden got up and walked out.

Old Ned just sat there, watching the stars.

EXCEPT FOR the occasional clearing of a throat or the scraping of a foot, silence blanketed the control room.

"Why don't they answer?" Hendrix said suddenly, banging his fist on a row of buttons. He had banged them thus a dozen times.

The intercoms were dead.

Bremmer had forgotten how long it was since the last report had come in. He was only aware of the slow, constricting movement of an unknown force of Juniors somewhere out beyond the auto-locked bulkheads of the bridge. What had happened to the Elder forces, no one knew. Probably never would know.

"Why don't they answer?" said Hendrix exhaustedly, punching the intercom buttons again.

Bremmer leaned back and closed his eyes, trying to shut out the light, the Ship—everything—from his mind.

He thought of Middleton, of the soft green park across the street from his second floor office, and how he used to stroll through it every morning and evening. The kids playing on the grass. Folks he knew, sitting on the benches near the circular plot of cannas.

"Bremmer was a good man. Wonder how he made out on that journey. Of course, he must have passed on years ago. . . ."

Bremmer pulled himself erect. He was wet with perspiration, his brain fogged by the sudden rush of memories he had thought long dead.

"It's hopeless," the Senior Chemist was saying. "We haven't even heard from Ryan."

"Why don't we try Useless town?" asked the Senior Physicist. "We need men. They've got 'em in droves down there—Elders included —and I don't see why they can't give us a hand."

Wearily, Hendrix punched an-

other button. To his surprise, there came an answer:

"Yeah, what's the trouble?"

"This is Captain Hendrix. Who's this?"

"Uh—yes, sir," said the tired voice. "It's Bill Kramer. Senior Welder."

"What's going on down there?" demanded Hendrix. "Where's Walker? Put him on."

There was an interval of silence. After awhile the tired voice said, "Can't. He's gone."

"Get him!" roared Hendrix. "Get him, do you hear?'

The intercom was silent except for a sound like shuffling feet. After a minute, Hendrix sank in his chair, his head in his hands.

Bremmer cleared his throat. "Do you suppose the Juniors have got at them?"

"Not unless they've smashed number six bulkhead," said Hendrix savagely. "It's been closed for two days."

"Don't you think we ought to send someone out to see?"

Hendrix shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Ryan should be back—" He nodded significantly toward the silent bulkhead that walled off the bridge from the rest of the ship.

"If you don't mind, I'll go," said Bremmer, standing up. "I don't relish waiting up here till they starve us out."

HE CAME out into the main corridor leading to Useless town, half expecting to see it swarming with Juniors. The passage was empty, weighted with a disturbing stillness. Bremmer's footsteps echoed down the length of it; he made no effort to quiet them. If the Juniors were lurking at the end of the corridor, let them take him.

The corridor ended in a square which was also empty. Three other corridors opened on the square, bending upward gradually with the curve of the ship's hull.

Empty. Where was everyone? Had the Juniors been there first?

Bremmer peered into the open door of a Rec Hall and saw it was deserted. There were signs of recent occupancy and a slovenliness that made him uneasy—a grimy deck of cards scattered on the floor, a broken bottle, an upturned table. But no people.

There were fifteen hundred people somewhere in the sector. Where were they?

Forgetting all caution, Bremmer quickened his steps and ran down one of the corridors. Now and then he paused to look into empty rooms. There were no signs of fighting. But there were—other signs.

In one room he found a noose, a strong, slender cord hanging from the bars of a ventilator opening. It made his stomach crawl. He could imagine hanging where a man's body weighed only thirty or forty pounds. Not a quick death—possibly no death at all. An implement of torture, maybe? Had the Juniors—

No, that didn't seem right, either.

A horrible suspicion drove him

forward at a run, guiding his steps. He didn't look in any more rooms. but ran straight ahead, the slap of his feet hammering in his ears. Breathless, he came to the end of the corridor—at number six airlock.

A man sat with his back against the inner door of the lock, his head forward on his knees. At first Bremmer thought he was dead, so quietly did he sit, but the man raised his head and gave him a glance that was empty of recognition—of hope. The eyes were empty as the space beyond the lock. A madman!

"Where—are—the others?" Bremmer said hoarsely, unconsciously spacing his words.

"Gone," said the man listlessly. Then, suddenly, he turned and pounded his fists against the inner door. "I didn't want to go" he screamed. "So they left me all alone! They went out and left me—"

The words exploded in Bremmer's head. He stood stunned as the maddened Useless One slumped to the floor, crying piteously. In the horrible loneliness of that grief, Bremmer could sense the solution.

There had been no fighting here, no Juniors. What had happened had been orderly—and inevitable. Only a madman remained, and he remained because he was mad. The others had been sane.

Fifteen hundred strong, old Ned and the Useless Ones had voluntarily marched to the airlocks and thrown themselves to the stars!

Death—the only solution. Mere organic immortality could not prolong a man's life indefinitely because it could not give him the will to live.

Slowly Bremmer turned and walked down the corridor.

One more job to do now. Go back and tell the others. Bremmer knew that the news would stop the fighting. No longer any need for fighting. Fifteen hundred old men and women had solved the problems of the ship by moving out to make room, swarming into empty space like lemmings.

That was it — lemmings. Little creatures who plunged into the sea and drowned by uncounted millions, pushed by instincts stronger than self-preservation.

Man, too, had his instincts. The need for work, for goals to occupy the mind, for meaningful tasks that did not allow day after day to blend into a consciousless eternity. And when these things lacked—the instinct to restore them for the good of the human race. So the Useless Ones had plunged into the sea—the limitless sea of space—and drowned.

Bremmer stumbled up the deserted corridor, heading back to where life and hope were sustained by a great idea, the spanning of far space.

Yet the dead minds reached out and haunted him. He could not shake them off. The useless had become the heroic. Though he and the living might survive forever, Bremmer knew, it was they who were the true immortals.

GILT-EDGED CLASSIC

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

VOICE *in the* NIGHT

An island in the Pacific— just the place for two castaway lovers. Privacy and peace . . . and creeping fungus

William Hope Hodgson (1877–1918) was a distinguished English writer of fantastic, mystery and sea stories. He is best known for his books, "The Ghost Pirates," "Men of the Deep Waters," and "Captain Gault," but his short story, "The Voice in the Night," is a classic of its genre.

IT WAS a dark, starless night. We were becalmed in the Northern Pacific. Our exact position I do not know, for the sun had been hidden during the course of a weary, breathless week, by a thin haze which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our mastheads, at whiles descending and shrouding the surrounding sea.

With there being no wind, we had steadied the tiller, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping forward in their den; while Will —my friend, and the master of our little craft—was aft in his bunk on the port side of the little cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the surrounding darkness, there came a hail:

"Schooner, ahoy!"

The cry was so unexpected that I

gave no immediate answer, because of my surprise.

It came again—a voice curiously throaty and inhuman, calling from somewhere upon the dark sea away on our port broadside:

"Schooner, ahoy!"

"Hullo!" I sang out, having gathered my wits somewhat. "What are you? What do you want?"

"You need not be afraid," answered the queer voice, having probably noticed some trace of confusion in my tone. "I am only an old—man."

The pause sounded oddly; but it was only afterwards that it came back to me with any significance.

"Why don't you come alongside, then?" I queried somewhat snappishly; for I liked not his hinting at my having been a trifle shaken.

"I—I—can't. It wouldn't be safe. I—" The voice broke off, and there was silence.

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing more and more astonished. "Why not safe? Where are you?"

I listened for a moment; but there came no answer. And then, a sudden indefinite suspicion, of I knew not what, coming to me, I stepped swiftly to the binnacle, and took out the lighted lamp. At the same time, I knocked on the deck with my heel to waken Will. Then I was back at the side, throwing the yellow funnel of light out into the silent immensity beyond our rail. As I did so, I heard a slight, muffled cry, and then the sound of a splash as though some one had dipped oars abruptly. Yet I cannot say that I saw anything with certainty; save, it seemed to me, that with the first flash of the light, there had been something upon the waters, where now there was nothing.

"Hullo, there!" I called. "What foolery is this!"

But there came only the indistinct sounds of a boat being pulled away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice, from the direction of the after scuttle:

"What's up, George?"

"Come here, Will!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him the queer thing which had happened. He put several questions; then, after a moment's silence, he raised his hands to his lips, and hailed: "Boat, ahoy!"

From a long distance away there came back to us a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. Presently, after a short period of silence, there grew on our hearing the muffled sound of oars; at which Will hailed again.

This time there was a reply:

"Put away the light."

"I'm damned if I will," I muttered; but Will told me to do as the voice bade, and I shoved it down under the bulwarks.

"Come nearer," he said, and the oar-strokes continued. Then, when apparently some half-dozen fathoms distant, they again ceased.

"Come alongside," exclaimed Will. "There's nothing to be frightened of aboard here!"

"Promise that you will not show the light?"

"What's to do with you," I burst out, "that you're so infernally afraid of the light?"

"Because—" began the voice, and stopped short.

"Because what?" I asked quickly.

Will put his hand on my shoulder.

"Shut up a minute, old man," he said, in a low voice. "Let me tackle him."

He bent lower over the rail.

"See here, Mister," he said, "this is a pretty queer business, you coming upon us like this, right out in the middle of the blessed Pacific. How are we to know what sort of a hanky-panky trick you're up to? You say there's only one of you. How are we to know, unless we get a squint at you—eh? What's your objection to the light, anyway?"

As he finished, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding extremely hopeless and pathetic.

"I am sorry—sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and—so is she."

The voice died away, and the sound of the oars, dipping irregularly, was borne to us.

"Stop!" sang out Will. "I don't want to drive you away. Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it."

He turned to me:

"It's a damned queer rig, this; but I think nothing to fear."

There was a question in his tone, and I replied.

"No, I think the poor devil's been wrecked around here and gone crazy."

The sound of the oars drew nearer.

"Shove that lamp back in the binnacle," said Will; then he leaned over the rail and listened. I replaced the lamp, and came back to his side. The dipping of the oars ceased some dozen yards distant.

"Won't you come alongside now?" asked Will in an even voice. "I have had the lamp put back in the binnacle."

"I—I cannot," replied the voice. "I dare not come nearer. I dare not even pay you for the—the provisions."

"That's all right," said Will, and hesitated. "You're welcome to as much grub as you can take—" Again he hesitated.

"You're very good," exclaimed the voice. "May God, Who understands everything, reward you—" It broke off huskily.

"The—the lady?" said Will abruptly. "Is she—"

"I have left her behind upon the island," came the voice.

"What island?" I cut in.

"I know not its name," returned the voice. "I would to God—!" it began, and checked itself as suddenly.

"Could we not send a boat for her?" asked Will at this point.

"No!" said the voice, with extraordinary emphasis. "My God! No!" There was a moment's pause; then it

added, in a tone which seemed a merited reproach:

"It was because of our want I ventured—because her agony tortured me!"

"I am a forgetful brute," exclaimed Will. "Just wait a minute, whoever you are, and I will bring you up something at once."

In a couple of minutes he was back again, and his arms were full of various edibles. He paused at the rail.

"Can't you come alongside for them?" he asked.

"No—I *dare not,*" replied the voice, and it seemed to me that in its tone I detected a note of stifled craving—as though the owner hushed a mortal desire. It came to me then, in a flash, that the poor old creature out there in the darkness was *suffering* for actual need of that which Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some unintelligible dread, refraining from dashing to the side of our little schooner and receiving it. And with the lightninglike conviction, there came the knowledge that the Invisible was not mad; but sanely facing some intolerable horror.

"Damn it, Will!" I said, full of many feelings, over which predominated a vast sympathy. "Get a box. We must float the stuff to him."

This we did—propelling it away from the vessel, out into the darkness, by means of a boathook. In a minute a slight cry from the Invisible came to us and we knew that he had secured the box.

A little later, he called out so heartful a blessing that I am sure we were the better for it. Then he said:

"I had thought to go out, without telling any of the terror which has come into our—lives. But tonight's happenings are under a special ruling and perhaps it is God's wish that I should tell to you all that we have suffered since—since—"

"Yes?" said Will, softly.

"Since the sinking of the *Albatross.*"

"Ah!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "She left Newcastle for 'Frisco some six months ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

"Yes," answered the voice. "But some few degrees to the North of the line she was caught in a terrible storm, and dismasted. When the day came it was found that she was leaking badly, and presently, it falling to a calm, the sailors took to the boats leaving—leaving a young lady—my fiancée—and myself upon the wreck.

"We were below, gathering together a few of our belongings when they left. They were entirely callous through fear, and when we came up on deck we saw them only as small shapes afar off upon the horizon. Yet we did not despair, but set to work and constructed a small raft. Upon this we put such few matters as it would hold and pushed off.

"It was later when I observed that we seemed to be in the way of some tide or current.

"For four days we drifted through a strange haze, until there grew

upon our ears the murmur of breakers at a distance. Gradually it became plainer and, somewhat after midnight, it appeared to sound upon either hand at no very great space. The raft was raised upon a swell several times, and then we were in smooth water and the noise of the breakers was behind.

"When the morning came we found that we were in a sort of great lagoon; but of this we noticed little at the time; for close before us, through the enshrouding mist, loomed the hull of a large sailing-vessel. With one accord we fell on our knees and thanked God; for we thought that here was an end to our perils. We had much to learn.

"The raft drew near to the ship and we shouted on them to take us aboard. But none answered. Presently the raft touched against the side of the vessel and, seeing a rope hanging downward, I seized it and began to climb. Yet I had much ado to make my way up, because of a kind of grey, lichenous fungus which had seized upon the rope and which blotched the side of the ship lividly.

"I reached the rail and clambered over it on to the deck. Here I saw that the decks were covered, in great patches, with the grey masses, some of them rising into nodules several feet in height. But at the time I thought less of this matter than of the possibility of there being people aboard the ship. I shouted; but none answered. Then I went to the door below the poop deck. I opened it and peered in. There was a great smell of staleness, so that I knew in a moment that nothing living was within and with the knowledge I shut the door quickly, for I felt suddenly lonely.

"I went back to the side where I had scrambled up. My—my sweetheart was still sitting quietly upon the raft. Seeing me look down she called up to know whether there were any aboard the ship. I replied that the vessel had the appearance of having been deserted; but that if she would wait a little I would see whether there was anything in the shape of a ladder by which she could ascend to the deck. Then we would make a search through the vessel together. A little later, on the opposite side of the decks, I found a rope side-ladder. This I carried across, and a minute afterward she was beside me.

"Together we explored the cabins and apartments in the after part of the ship; but nowhere was there any sign of life. Here and there, within the cabins themselves, we came across odd patches of that queer fungus; but this, as my sweetheart said, could be cleansed away.

"In the end, having assured ourselves that the after portion of the vessel was empty, we picked our way to the bows between the ugly grey nodules of that strange growth and here we made a further search, which told us that there was indeed none aboard but ourselves.

"This being now beyond any

doubt, we returned to the stern of the ship and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Together we cleared out and cleaned two of the cabins and after that I made examination whether there was anything eatable in the ship. This I soon found was so, and thanked God in my heart for His goodness. In addition to this I discovered the whereabouts of the fresh-water pump, and having fixed it I found the water drinkable, though somewhat unpleasant to the taste.

"For several days we stayed aboard the ship without attempting to get to the shore. We were busily engaged in making the place habitable. Yet even thus early we became aware that our lot was even less to be desired than might have been imagined for, though as a first step we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned almost to their original size within twenty-four hours. This not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease.

"Still we would not admit ourselves beaten. We set to work afresh and not only scraped away the fungus but soaked the places where it had been with carbolic, a canful of which I had found in the pantry. Yet, by the end of the week, the growth had returned in full strength and, in addition, had spread to other places as though our touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere.

"On the seventh day my sweetheart woke to find a small patch of it growing on her pillow, close to her face. At that she came to me so soon as she could get her garments upon her. I was in the galley at the time, lighting the fire for breakfast.

" 'Come here, John,' she said, and led me aft. When I saw the thing upon her pillow I shuddered and then and there we agreed to go right out of the ship and see whether we could not fare to make ourselves more comfortable ashore.

"Hurriedly we gathered together our few belongings and, even among these, I found that the fungus had been at work. One of her shawls had a little lump of it growing near one edge. I threw the whole thing over the side without saying anything to her.

"The raft was still alongside, but it was too clumsy to guide and I lowered a small boat that hung across the stern. In this we made our way to the shore. Yet, as we drew near, I gradually became aware that here the vile fungus which had driven us from the ship was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds which seemed almost to quiver as with a quiet life when the wind blew across them. Here and there it took on the forms of vast fingers and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous. Odd places, it appeared as grotesque stunted trees, seeming extraordinarily kinked and gnarled—the whole quaking vilely at times.

"At first it seemed to us that there was no single portion of the surrounding shore which was not hidden beneath the masses of the hideous lichen. Yet in this, I found, we were mistaken, for somewhat later, coasting along the shore at a little distance, we descried a smooth white patch of what appeared to be fine sand and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was I do not know. All that I have observed is that upon it the fungus will not grow. Everywhere else, save where the sandlike earth wanders, pathwise, amid the grey desolation of the lichen, there is nothing but that loathsome greyness.

"It is difficult to make you understand how cheered we were to find one place that was absolutely free from the growth. Here we deposited our belongings. Then we went back to the ship for such things as it seemed to us we should need. Among other matters, I managed to bring ashore one of the ship's sails, with which I constructed two small tents, which, though exceedingly rough-shaped, served the purpose for which they were intended. In these we lived and stored our various necessities and thus for a matter of some four weeks all went smoothly and without particular unhappiness. Indeed, I may say with much of happiness—for—for we were together.

"It was on the thumb of her right hand that the growth first showed. It was only a small circular spot, much like a little grey mole. My God! How the fear leapt to my heart when she showed me the place. We cleansed it, between us, washing it with carbolic and water. In the morning of the following day she showed her hand to me again. The grey warty thing had returned. For a little while we looked at one another in silence. Then, still wordless, we started again to remove it. In the midst of the operation she spoke suddenly.

" 'What's that on the side of your face, dear?' Her voice was sharp with anxiety. I put my hand up to feel.

" 'There! Under the hair by your ear. A little to the front.' My finger rested on the place and then I knew.

" 'Let us get your thumb done first,' I said. And she submitted only because she was afraid to touch me until it was cleansed. I finished washing and disinfecting her thumb, and then she turned to my face. After it was finished we sat together and talked awhile of many things. There had come into our lives sudden, very terrible thoughts. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with provisions and water and making our way out on to the sea. Yet we were helpless, for many causes and—and the growth had attacked us already. We decided to stay. God would do with us what was His will. We would wait.

"A month, two months, three months passed and the places grew somewhat and there had come others. Yet we fought so strenuously with

the fear that its headway was but slow, comparatively speaking.

"Occasionally we ventured off to the ship for such stores as we needed. There we found that the fungus grew persistently. One of the nodules on the maindeck became soon as high as my head.

"We had now given up all thought or hope of leaving the island. We had realized that it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans with the things from which we were suffering. With this determination in our minds we knew that we should have to husband our food and water, for we did not know at that time but that we should possibly live for many years.

"This reminds me that I have told you that I am an old man. Judged by years this is not so. But—but—"

He broke off, then continued somewhat abruptly:

"As I was saying, we knew that we should have to use care in the matter of food. But we had no idea then how little food there was left of which to take care. It was a week later that I made the discovery that all the other bread tanks—which I had supposed full—were empty, and that (beyond odd tins of vegetables and meat and some other matters) we had nothing on which to depend but the bread in the tank which I had already opened.

"After learning this I bestirred myself to do what I could and set to work at fishing in the lagoon, but with no success. At this I was somewhat inclined to feel desperate until the thought came to me to try outside the lagoon in the open sea.

"Here, at times, I caught odd fish, but so infrequently that they proved of but little help in keeping us from the hunger which threatened. It seemed to me that our deaths were likely to come by hunger and not by the growth of the thing which had seized upon our bodies.

"We were in this state of mind when the fourth month wore out. Then I made a very horrible discovery. One morning, a little before midday, I came off from the ship with a portion of the biscuits which were left. In the mouth of her tent I saw my sweetheart, sitting, eating something.

" 'What is it, my dear?' I called out as I leaped ashore. Yet, on hearing my voice, she seemed confused and, turning, slyly threw something toward the edge of the little clearing. It fell short and a vague suspicion made me walk across and pick it up. It was a piece of the grey fungus.

"As I went to her with it in my hand she turned deadly pale, then a rose red. I felt strangely dazed and frightened.

" 'My dear! My dear!' I said, and could say no more. Yet at my words she broke down and cried bitterly. Gradually, as she calmed, I got from her the news that she had tried it the preceding day and—and liked it. I got her to promise on her knees not to touch it again, however great our hunger. After she had promised

she told me that the desire for it had come suddenly, and that until the moment of desire she had experienced only the most extreme repulsion.

"Later in the day, feeling strangely restless, I was called to myself by a queer hoarse sound on my left. Turning quickly I saw that there was movement among an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus, close to my elbow. As I stared, the thought came to me that the thing had a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted human creature. Even as the fancy flashed into my brain, there was a slight, sickening noise of tearing and I saw that one of the branch-like arms was detaching itself from the surrounding grey mass and coming toward me. The head of the thing—a shapeless grey ball, inclined in my direction. I stood stupidly and the vile arm brushed across my face. I gave a frightened cry and ran back a few paces. There was a sweetish taste on my lips where the thing had touched me. I licked them and was immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more and—more. I was insatiable. In the midst of devouring, the remembrance of the morning's discovery swept into my mazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held to the ground.

"Doubtless, I had seen the end of one of those men who had come to the island in the ship in the lagoon, and in that monstrous ending I had seen our own.

"Thereafter we kept from the abominable food, though the desire for it had entered into our blood. Yet our drear punishment was upon us for, day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our bodies. We who had been human became— Well, it matters less each day. Only—only we had been man and maid!

"And day by day the fight is more dreadful, to withstand the hunger-lust for the terrible lichen.

"A week ago we ate the last of the biscuit, and since that time I have caught three fish. I was out here fishing tonight when your schooner drifted upon me out of the mist."

"God bless you! Goodbye!"

"Goodbye," we shouted together, hoarsely, our hearts full of emotion.

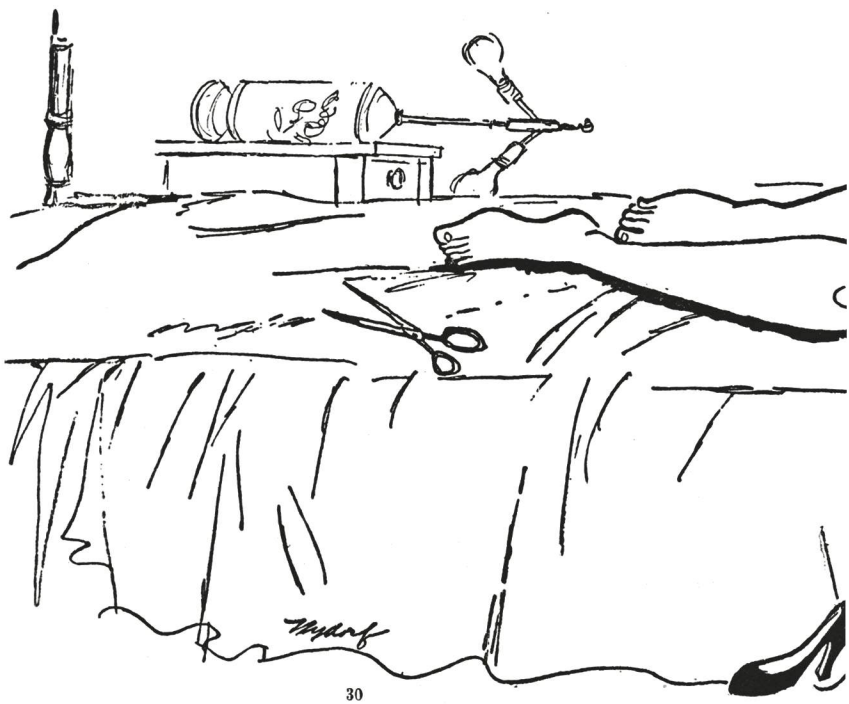
I glanced about me. I became aware that the dawn was upon us.

The sun flung a stray beam across the hidden sea, pierced the mist dully and lit up the receding boat with a gloomy fire. Indistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars. I thought of a sponge—a great, grey nodding sponge— The oars continued to ply. They were grey—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke. Then the oars were dipped, the boat shot out of the patch of light, and the—the thing went nodding into the mist.

MYSTERY

A MOST AMAZING

The killing? Discovered before an hour had passed. The obvious suspect? Picked up before the night was over. The motive? Clear as a glass of drinking water. It looked like one of those swift, easy crime breaks which sometimes win praise for an overworked police force. It wasn't!

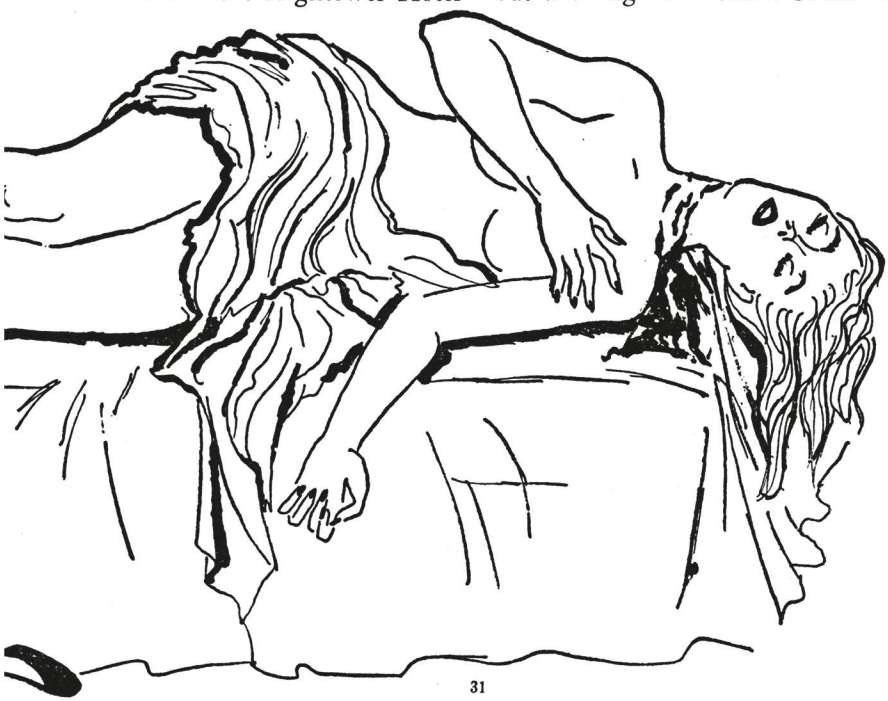


MURDER

A. B. SHIFFRIN

NEVER was the obvious so baffling. At least, not in my own experience. I was the cop in charge of the crazy case, so I can tell you all about it.

Now, get this. One warm September evening a middle-aged beauty known as Veronica Walters left the cocktail bar of the Hightower Hotel in midtown Manhattan. With her was a friend, Billy Graham. She chatted with Billy for a while and arranged for him to call her in an hour. Then she took the elevator to her room. There, we figured out later, she refreshed herself with a shower, smoked a cigarette and laid out a change of clothes. Seems she



. . . about the author

Brooklynite A. B. Shiffrin is primarily known as a playwright. His *I Like It Here* starred Oscar Karlweiss and *Angel in the Pawnshop* opened on Broadway this season. He's married, father of two novels and a flock of short stories. "Murder isn't my forte," he says. "I'm better at satirical comedy. But for variety I love to kill off a few people now and then."

was going out with Billy that night and I suppose she wanted to look ravishing when he toured the spots with her.

Promptly at eight, Graham called her from downstairs. No answer. Puzzled, he hopped the elevator to her floor. He jabbed a finger in the bell of her door. He heard the ringing inside. That's all he heard. He grabbed the doorknob and gave it a workout. The door was locked and bolted. He dropped to one knee and tried the keyhole, but a chair blocked his view. He stood up, rang the bell again, then, glancing around, saw a bench in the hallway. He pulled it up to the door, climbed on it and looked into the room through the transom which was open about ten inches for ventilation. He looked, and felt sick.

Quickly he jumped from the bench, reached the door of the elevator shaft and held down the bell. He didn't release it until the elevator shot up and an angry operator confronted him. Billy Graham told him to get down in a hurry and call the police. The squeal reached Homicide from Precinct, and I got there almost as soon as the cop on the local beat.

We found Veronica Walters lying on her bed, long-limbed, naked, beautiful despite her maturity, and dead. Her throat had been slit by a sharp instrument, not once but a dozen times, back and forth. A necklace of trickled blood adorned her bosom. The weapon was lying on the bed near her. It was a pair of scissors. They were her own.

There were no clues that made any sense. I'm a pretty thorough guy, which is why I got charge of the investigation. But I found no meaningful fingerprints. The window was shut tight, and even if it had been open it was plain enough that no one could have entered or left through it. It was sheer precipice, without fire-escape or ledge, six stories above the street, five from the roof. The door to the room had been locked and bolted from the inside. We had to force it to gain entrance.

Billy Graham was scared. He talked. Veronica was his girl, if a striking blonde pushing forty could be referred to as a girl. He himself was a small-time gambler. He didn't

deny it. He had latched on to Veronica because she seemed to have an income which she didn't mind sharing with him in gratitude for his devotion.

The source of her income? Here Billy Graham hesitated and I had to prod. It didn't take much to make him eloquent. He was afraid that a non-cooperative attitude might result in a lot of personal distress for him. The killing might be pinned on him and in the course of proving his innocence he would have to divulge many facets of his private life which he preferred to keep secret and sacred. Therefore, when he started to talk he said plenty and an hour later I went out to pick up a character called Jimmy Longfellow.

It wasn't difficult. I just waited around a prominent television studio one night until he finished his act. He was a ventriloquist. He had a program of his own which was pretty popular and getting more so. "Longfellow and Shortfellow," he billed himself. Shortfellow sat on Longfellow's knee and carried on comical discussions with his master. Everyone took to the little fellow and affectionately called him Shorty. Me, I had always thought it one of the finest ventriloquist acts I'd seen, maybe surpassing even the Bergen-McCarthy combination.

When I accosted Longfellow he was coming out of the studio with his impeccably dressed dummy dangling under his arm.

I told him who I was and what I wanted. Jimmy Longfellow turned out to be pretty laconic off stage. He saved his talking for his audiences. He looked puzzled when I spoke to him; just raised an eyebrow and grunted. But he made no fuss about going along with me to headquarters.

I watched him as he put the dummy into an expensive traveling case. It was richly lined with soft-looking stuff and had room for Shorty's high hat and cane. Longfellow handled the thing tenderly, as though it were a priceless instrument—which Shorty was, for without him Longfellow would be only another actor looking for work. So he laid Shorty out carefully, lowered the lid, snapped the lock, and for good measure inserted a key and gave it a twist. Shorty was safe for the night.

Jimmy asked if we might stop at the hotel first so that he could deposit his partner in his room. This we did. The room was right next to Veronica Walter's. There was no connecting door.

As we were leaving the hotel I broke the sad news. He looked shocked enough when I told him she was dead, and how she had died. I watched him closely. It was genuine shock all right. He was straightforward. He admitted knowing her. He didn't do much talking as we drove to headquarters but once there he talked readily and to the point, like a wise man knowing the futility of evasion.

Veronica Walters had been blackmailing him. He had known her intimately once. She had been his stage partner until two years before when he had dropped her act and turned to ventriloquism. It had been a smart move. From an obscure entertainer he had moved swiftly to top billing.

On one point he was stubborn for a long time. When I asked him why Veronica was blackmailing him, what she had on him, he refused to talk. For over a year he had been paying her monthly sums of money. The sums grew larger with each payment. It was as though there were an escalator clause in their private agreement. As his earnings grew her demands grew. The last check had been for a thousand, the one before for seven hundred and fifty, the one to follow—Longfellow admitted it—was going to be two thousand. That was more than his weekly take!

Why did he pay her the money? When it looked as though we would keep him all night and perhaps for many nights, until he told us, he began to worry about Shorty in the hotel room. Somebody might steal him. He began to worry about a series of guest appearances he was scheduled to make. They were worth ten grand to him. They weren't worth two cents if we didn't release him. Then he spoke what sounded like the truth. Personally, I believed him. Veronica had something on him. It had to do with his birth and it involved a fine old woman who was still alive. The scandal, if these revelations were made public, would hurt his career and undoubtedly kill the old woman. It was better to pay the hush money. He paid.

He denied killing Veronica. He had never laid a hand on her. He had never threatened her. He maintained that he had not seen her in the hotel, although he knew that she traveled around the country, stopping wherever he stopped. Now that she was dead, he didn't mourn her. He was glad she was gone, a load off his mind and off his bank account.

Everything pointed to Jimmy Longfellow as the killer, but we could pin nothing definite on him. We knew when the murder had taken place and at that very moment he had been sitting alone, as was his custom, in the hotel dining room, having an early, leisurely dinner before going on the air with his television show. He was a man easily remembered and easily identified. Waiters and fellow diners had witnessed his presence—had seen him eating, heard him ordering. He had a remarkable baritone voice which could be heard in every corner of the dining room. He was six feet six inches tall, which was why he used the name of Longfellow. And while he was in the room, eating, under the scrutiny of a hundred curious eyes, some one was in the act of killing Veronica Walters. Jimmy was well in the clear!

We had to let him go, obviously.

In a way I was glad. I had always enjoyed his act. He was by far the best of them. Longfellow had done wonders with his little dummy. *Billboard* and *Variety* proclaimed his genius with hallelujahs every time the two made an appearance anywhere. Jimmy had fixed up the dummy with glasses, heavy plastic rims and temples, giving the stooge the appearance of an intellectual. His language too was something special, grammatical and often polysyllabic. The crowds loved to hear the big words roll from the little fellow's mouth. There was a delightful leer painted on his face. His grinning jaw seemed attached by hinges and the bright porcelain teeth clicked when the mouth closed. Jimmy was not content merely with voice magic. He trained his wooden Trilby to respond in pantomime. Shorty could raise a gloved hand to scratch his head or thumb his nose. He could wink, stick his tongue out, twirl a cane—his limbs moving abruptly, stiffly, jerkily, and yet with a strange rhythm and grace. He was a tiny thing, sitting on Jimmy Longfellow's knee, but so exquisite was the craftsmanship that had created him that the carved little dummy had almost human attributes. And some wags went so far as to suggest that they eliminate Longfellow and Bergen entirely and have an act consisting of an ad lib encounter between Charlie McCarthy and Shorty. That's something I'd have enjoyed!

Several months after the killing of Veronica Walters the case began to fade away. It had left the papers long ago. It was beginning to leave most memories. Another unsolved murder.

I too was forgetting it. There was always something new to keep me busy. But one day I saw in the papers that Longfellow and his act were coming to New York after a long and sensational tour of the hinterland. I, and some of the boys, were talking about his phenomenal climb from obscurity to fame when suddenly a thought hit me and I laughed and dismissed it. It hit me again. I mentioned it. They all laughed. What I had said was, what if Longfellow had slipped Shorty through the transom, maybe with a rope attached to his waist, and then marched off to the dining room. His meal finished, his presence firmly established, he returned to his quarters, pausing only to rescue Shorty through the transom. Shorty, by this time, had cut Veronica's throat. It was quite a thought, in fact it was hilarious, and we kicked it around, chuckling, building on it. Sure, Longfellow had breathed life into Shorty, hypnotized him, taught him to walk, to climb, to hold a pair of scissors and take human life. Another Svengali. Or another Pinnochio. Black magic, voodoo. All very amusing and we had our fun and we forgot all about it.

But the next day I went to the theatre and caught the show. It was

sensational. It was so good I decided to interview Jimmy Longfellow. I followed him from the theatre to the hotel. I made contact with headquarters and I had two men in uniform join me. We went up to his room. A tray of food was being wheeled in by a waiter. I was about to hit the door with my knuckles when I decided to let Jimmy have dinner first. He had worked hard. A man is entitled to enjoy a meal when he's hungry.

Finally I knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Police."

There was a pause. I knocked again, insistently. I didn't give him much time now. I shoved against the door. He opened it. I told him he was wanted at headquarters, immediately. He recognized me. He wasn't angry. He eyed me curiously.

"I'd better tuck Shorty away for the night," he said quietly. I nodded. Shorty seemed to have been flung on his back on a sofa, his limbs stretched out awkwardly, the wonderful painted grin on his face, the high hat stuck to his head. Longfellow picked him up gently and straightening the angled hands and legs placed him in the bed of the handsome traveling case. He closed it, locked it, and was ready to go with us.

We escorted Longfellow to the car and at the last minute I pleaded another errand and told the boys I'd meet them at headquarters. I got a pass key at the desk. I entered Longfellow's room.

I made a thorough search of the place and found nothing. I was just about to leave when I heard a knock.

It was the waiter, coming to get the food tray. Then I saw something that made me think.

A lot of dishes on that tray! I asked the waiter about this. He said that Mr. Longfellow always ordered double portions. He was a great eater. Look at the size of him. Unsatisfied, I let the waiter go.

I stood over the traveling case. I knelt. I tapped. Silence. What did I expect? Perhaps Longfellow had been teaching his stooge a new trick. Eating.

Then I noticed something I hadn't seen before. There were tiny perforations in the traveling case. Pinpoints that penetrated the leather. Air holes?

I lit a cigarette. My heart was pounding. I inhaled deeply. Then I exhaled—right into the little holes. I did it again. Again. Again.

Then I heard a faint gasp. Then I heard a cough.

Then I knew.

Veronica Walters had known too, and had made of her secret knowledge a good thing as blackmailer. It cost her her life. And now I was the only one outside of Longfellow himself who knew that the source of the tall ventriloquist's fame and fortune was a living, breathing, moving, seeing, talking *midget*—trained by his master to play the role of a dummy!

SCIENCE-STORYETTE

obviously SUICIDE

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

Three chemicals and a hot wire
and—poof!—the world would end.
Somebody ought to take steps—

S. Fowler Wright, at 70, is not only the oldest writer contributing to the current SUSPENSE*—but happens also to be the only living author who has collaborated with Sir Walter Scott! When the Great Scott at his death left an uncompleted novel,* The Siege of Malta, *and a new translation of Dante's* Inferno, *Mr. Wright finished both with noteworthy brilliance. Residing in London, he has written some 60 novels of his own and 25 well known mysteries under the pseudonym Sidney Fowler.*

IN ABOUT two seconds the Earth would dissolve in a blaze of fire," the research worker at the N. U. Laboratories told his wife. "There would be a burst of light and—one planet less in the universe. The amazing aspect is its very simplicity. It could be made in a backyard shed. All one needs is a combination of three substances, all easy to obtain, and then nothing more than a loop of heated wire."

"Wouldn't it be common prudence to get rid of these substances entirely?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, they are so widely distributed, and in such general use, that their complete destruction would be quite impossible."

"You mean that if this should become known, any lunatic—or any criminal without hope of escape or pardon—could destroy the human race in a form of universal suicide?"

"It is impossible not to be apprehensive." The research worker calm-

ly lit his pipe. "It is known to our Grade A men—that is, to about thirty, now. We are sworn to secrecy as to its ingredients, which I should not think to disclose, even to you. But if there should be one among us who now, or in the future—"

"How has it become known to so many?"

"The possibility was first raised at the weekly conference which is attended by all of the first grade. Several of us worked separately upon it, by experiment to a point, and, beyond that, by mathematical calculations. All reached the same conclusion. It is hardly a matter which could be put to experimental test, but the conclusion is beyond reasonable doubt."

"Then it should surely be wiped out and forgotten as completely as possible from the minds of all of you who share such perilous knowledge."

"We have discussed that already, and shall do so again at a special meeting tomorrow. It may be decided in that way. But differences of opinion are natural among so many. At our last meeting, there were three who objected at once. No scientific fact, they argued, should be treated in such a way. . . . The trouble is that, though the calculations may be destroyed, the process and ingredients are too simple to be put out of mind—especially out of such minds as ours."

"Yet it seems the only sensible thing to do. . . . And if any object, I should say the best thing to do would be to put them in a lethal chamber before they would have time to do a mischief which none could limit."

Grafton agreed to that. There was no more said, and his wife slept.

But he found that he could not sleep. During the past week he had been imagining what it would be like to live in a world which it was common knowledge that anyone could destroy at an instant's caprice. Even the threat, which might soon be on every uncrupulous tongue—"Give me what I demand, or we shall all be gone in the next hour"—would be one which the bravest might find it hard to ignore.

Apart from that, how long would it be likely that the Earth *would* exist, if this knowledge were once at large? Each month there were thousands of suicides of men of different races, of every disposition. Would there be none who would elect an exit of so dramatic a kind? Cast this knowledge abroad, and it would become improbable that Earth could endure for a further week. Yet what could now be done?

But his wife, being refreshed by a night of dreamless sleep, proposed that which, to him, had a startling sound.

Women are more practical and more ruthless than men. She had looked at the bed where a young child slept, and she thought of his sister, a year older, in the next room. Then she said: "If it were possible for the thirty to be destroyed before

they could give their knowledge to other men, it would be the best thing that could happen now."

He said: "Oh, but my dear, think who they are! There's Professor Gribstein, and Dr. Thornton, and—"

"I never did like Dr. Thornton," she replied, as a woman would.

He did not give two thoughts to this criminal suggestion at the time, and it might never have re-entered his mind had there not been a discussion in the Council which became heated when it was clear that a substantial minority were indisposed to put the knowledge aside. One even suggested that they should make a public announcement of their discovery, so that they might become a Council of Thirty who would control a world that would crouch around them in abject fear. . . . And then the idea came to his mind of how simply it could be done. . . . At their next meeting, when they would all be assembled together, and he could be absent! He could have a bad cold! A *real* cold! It would be easy to contrive that. . . . The scentless deadly gas which was for use in the next war—a herd of two hundred cattle had been destroyed in seventeen seconds by a smaller quantity than was in the little cylinder on the high shelf of the room where they always met! Kept for special security there. And most effectually sealed. But a corrosive acid could be timed to eat through the cylinder wall. (They would not know how they died, nor, more important, would anyone else.) It was certainly an attractive idea. And even Maude, a kind-hearted, sentimental woman, said it was the right thing to do. When he came to consider the matter, *he* didn't like Dr. Thornton either. . . . And it would certainly leave him in an unrivaled position!

So, when the Council met again, it was done.

And no one suspected him in the least.

His one mistake was that he told Maude, thinking that she would approve, as indeed she did.

He said that the power was now in his hands alone, and he must consider the wisest course.

Maude thought of many things. Among these was the doubt of what, if or when he were dying, he might be tempted to do. She looked again at a sleeping child, and then did the practical thing.

It was a purlieu in which poisons were not hard to procure. She gave it to him in his morning coffee.

It was a clear case of suicide, for she was able to say that he had told her of the twenty-nine deaths which had preceded his own, that they were due to some carelessness of omission on his part, and his remorse had been painful to see.

It was very necessary to avoid suspicion falling upon herself. She had two children for whom to live. And she was aware of the gravity with which the law might regard the death of one man—though it seemed to take lightly the killing of millions.

the eye-witness who WOULDN'T *see*

JAMES A. KIRCH

Joe was one of the little guys and he couldn't afford to stick his neck out. But then came a time when he stopped playing turtle —and things began to happen fast . . .

"WHAT'LL IT BE?" I asked.

The big fellow brought his hand up with a wallet, flipped it open and let me look at the badge.

"Okay," I said. "What'll it be?"

He rested his thick hands on the counter and his eyes held mine. "Coffee," he said.

I filled a cup from the glass pot on the stove and ladled milk into it. A little milk spilled out and sputtered on the griddle. I put the cup down in front of him and waited.

He slid a dime across the counter, but I didn't pick it up. That wasn't what I was waiting for. He shook sugar into the coffee and stirred it, then pushed the cup away from him.

"All right, Mac," he said. "Where is she?"

"The name's Joe," I told him. "Joe Raymond." I pointed to the plastic name plate I wore on my shirt.

"I know, Mac," he said. "Joe Ray-

THE AUTHOR: *Once Jim Kerch analyzed securities. Then the Wall Street firm for which he worked went broke, and he took to analyzing crime stories. Having reduced these to the components he considered important, he started to put them together in odd moments—and found himself a writer! That is, a few detective magazines—some now defunct, some still living—favored him with small checks. Mr. Kerch began to pyramid, investing feverishly in new typewriter-ribbons and great quantities of bond—not watered. Soon his literature was appearing in virtually all the detective periodicals and in many of the popular slicks; critics accused him of trying to corner the market. "A lie," he replies, to the canard that editors favor his stories because they always come in written on the backs of beautiful—though worthless —old stock certificates.*

mond, Prop. That's not what I asked you. What I want to know is, where is she?"

They'd been crowding me for days now. Every time I'd think they were going to lay off, one of them would come in and sit down and start the whole thing over again. Always somebody crawling in my hair, asking the question I couldn't answer.

"I told you," I said. "I don't know."

He nodded slowly, as if he believed me. "Oh," he said. "You told us." He thought it over. "Yeah," he said, "you told us. What did you tell Al Vance?"

He threw it at me before I was ready for it. If I'd been set, I wouldn't have laid myself open like I did. I answered without thinking it out. "Al Vance?" I said. "I don't know him. He hasn't even been in."

He let his fingers drum on the counter top. "His boys," he said. "Now don't tell me his friends haven't been around."

I hadn't thought it out right. I knew they were watching the diner. I should have realized they'd have tagged the men who came in from Al Vance. I'd slipped up on that one. I'd have to be more careful.

"Look," I said, "I don't know everybody. Maybe some of those who've been asking questions come from Mr. Vance. I thought they were from you."

"Maybe you couldn't see them clear?" he said. "Maybe your eyes went bad again? Maybe that was it?"

My hands started shaking. I picked up a rag and rubbed the top of the counter, pressing down hard until the twitch went out of them. "My eyes are all right," I said. "I never said there was anything wrong with my eyes."

"No," he said. "But it's funny, Mac. Two men come in here and

have coffee. They take a booth in the corner. The waitress sees them all right."

"Molly was serving them," I cut in. "She couldn't help—"

"Yeah," he said. "Molly was serving them. And she sees them clear. She even describes the one that leaves. But not you."

"I told you," I said. "I was cleaning up. I was polishing the stove, shining up under the sink." I pointed to the pipes. "I wasn't thinking of them."

"Not even when you heard the shot?"

"Like I said," I told him, "I was down under the sink. When I heard the shot, I turned around and raised up, but he was gone. All I saw was his back. He had on a gray coat. And a gray hat. I told you everything I could."

"You were a big help," he said. "You cut it down to two million people." He drew his coffee cup toward him and cradled it in his hands. "That girl friend of yours," he said. "Molly. She's quite a girl, Mac."

A lot he cared about Molly. They'd taken her statement about these two men who'd come in and ordered coffee, about how they seemed to be arguing with each other, and how the older one got up and started to the phone and the young one pulled a gun and shot him. She told them everything. I couldn't stop her. The police had come in too fast for me to shake her out of the daze she was in. They questioned me, and I gave them my story, how I'd been polishing the pipes, and then they asked her to go to Headquarters and look at pictures.

I had a minute with her just before she left. I tried to warn her. "Look, Molly," I said, "take it easy. In a case like this you've got to be sure. Don't go overboard. Don't get jammed up, Molly."

Her gray eyes tried to smile at me. "It's all right, Joe," she said. "I won't make a mistake. I saw him clear."

Then the detective said, "Ready, Miss Matthews?" and took her arm and they went up to Headquarters.

And she picked out Dave Vance. Al Vance's kid brother.

If she'd been city-raised, like I was, she'd have known better. People like us couldn't afford to get mixed up with his kind. Al Vance was too big for us. He was even too big for the police. They'd arrested him twice, once on a hot-cars charge and once for murder. Both times, he laughed when he walked off scot-free. The second time, in the murder case, they hadn't even brought Al Vance up in court. The only witness had disappeared. He'd just dropped out of sight. Nobody ever could prove what had happened to him. Nobody ever saw him again. That's what happened to people who got in the way of the Vances. That's what Molly was asking for when she tagged Dave Vance for murder.

They shouldn't have let her do it. A kid like Molly, in a mess like that.

But they didn't care. They hadn't even tried to protect her. I told him that now. I let it all spill out of me, leaning over the counter and telling him.

"She'd have been all right," he said. "We had a man on her. But she shook him and dusted. That's where she played it wrong."

That's what he thought, that she'd played it wrong. That's when she started to get smart, when she dropped out of the picture.

"It's too bad," he went on. "She wouldn't have been so important if you'd just seen him, too."

I knew what he wanted. But he couldn't make me do it. He couldn't make me say I'd seen anybody. I told him that.

His eyes tightened a little. "We could, Mac. We could get it out of you, all right. But it's no use. You'd fold. They'd make a monkey out of you on the stand." His coffee was cold, but he drank it down. "This Molly, Mac," he said, as he got up to leave. "You find out where she is, give us a ring. Ask for Sergeant Cotter." He waved his hand toward the coffee stove behind me, where the milk had spilled over. "Better polish it, Mac. Clean it up. Keep it all nice and shiny and clean." He went out without saying goodnight.

The other one didn't come in until late, maybe half an hour before it was time to close. He took a stool near the side door. He had a paper with him and he unfolded it and held it so it shielded his face from the entrance. "Hello, Joe," he said. "What have you got for me?"

"Ham," I said. "Scrambled eggs, roast beef, meat loaf . . ."

"Milk," he said. "But that's not what I meant."

He didn't have to tell me that wasn't what he meant. He'd never been in before, but I knew what he wanted.

He was a thin man, with thin, narrow shoulders and a tight, narrow face. He was the kind you might think would get pushed around. I didn't figure I could push him around. I gave him his milk.

He said, "Joe, don't get me wrong. I want to help her."

"I don't know where she is," I said.

He said, "She's your girl. You two have it bad. We know that. She'd get in touch with you. She should get out of town. That's all we want."

"She maybe is out of town," I said.

He didn't seem to hear me. "That's what she should do. Clear out. We could help her, Joe. We've got ways."

"She's probably already gone," I said. "She probably just beat it."

"A new name," he went on. "And once she gets settled, you could follow her, Joe."

"Look," I said, "you've got it all wrong. You go back and tell Mr. Vance I don't know where she is."

"Uh-huh," he said. He drank his milk. "Joe," he said, "don't be dumb about this. Don't make people sore."

My hands were shaking again. I said, "I don't know where she is."

The door opened and a man came in. He had on a brown coat and a new brown hat. He stood looking at the clock behind the counter. "That clock right?" he asked.

I nodded. The thin man got off his stool, and laid a dime on the counter. "It's certainly a nice place," he said. He went out the side door.

The man who had come in stood there, looking at the clock.

"What'll it be?" I asked him.

He shook his head and then his hand went in under his coat. He brought it out with a watch in it. "Just checking the time," he said, and went out.

I closed at midnight. I locked the doors and dimmed the lights and then spent an hour cleaning the place up. I did everything just the way I always did it.

But when you're keyed up, you imagine things. That's how it was with me. After I had locked the door, I felt eyes watching me from all sides. All the way home to my room I felt the eyes watching and heard footsteps behind me. I had to walk slow and steady, not running or anything, not giving anybody ideas, but all the time I heard the footsteps. Even when I got to my room and closed the door, it seemed as if I could still feel eyes watching me.

I didn't pull down the shade. I sat on the bed for a while, like anybody might who'd just finished a hard shift, and then I undressed and stretched out. I smoked one cigarette before I reached up and pulled out the light.

It was the way I did every night, after I'd closed up and come home. There was nothing to give anyone an idea that I had any special plans. I always did it just like that, had a cigarette and then pulled out the light and went to sleep.

Only this time, I couldn't go to sleep.

I kept thinking how lucky it had been about the cat. When I first saw the jam Molly had got herself into, I'd thought right away what a break that was. Otherwise, it would have been tough. You can't just walk into a hotel, or even a rooming house, when the whole town's looking for you. But this way, because of my cousin's cat, it was all right.

He'd gone away for his week's vacation and stopped in the diner and left me his keys so I could go in and feed Ringo. That's how things go. I was doing him a favor, and then, when it happened, I had what I needed—a place for Molly.

Tomorrow, I'd get the letter. As it was now, Molly couldn't get out of town because the police were watching the stations. So I'd had to figure out some way to make them stop watching.

That's when I'd hit on the letter. If they thought she was already out of town, there'd be no sense in their watching for her at the stations. If I got a letter from Chicago, they'd see it. They follow people around; they listen in on phone calls. They'd

watch the mail, all right. Before I'd left Molly that night I'd had her write me a letter saying she was okay and would get in touch with me later, and I'd sent it with a quarter to a forwarding place in Chicago. Tomorrow, it would be delivered to me, and then I could call Molly and tell her it was okay to go to the station. And she'd be out of it.

I thought about that for a while, about Molly getting clear of this jam, and then I got out of bed and went to the window and looked out.

There was a car parked halfway down the block, facing my way. I saw a light flicker in the front seat, as if somebody had struck a match under the dashboard for a cigarette. Even then, I couldn't be sure who it was. A policeman wasn't supposed to smoke on duty, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do it. It didn't matter much who it was. He was parked out there hoping I'd lead him to Molly. I went back to bed and waited for morning.

It would have been better if I'd been able to sleep. I wouldn't have been so much on edge. The daytime shift is always a rough one, and I couldn't walk away from it for a phone call, not even after the letter from Chicago came, in Molly's handwriting. It wouldn't have looked right.

It was the usual rush. By evening, I was out on my feet. With a mob like that, I couldn't take the time to tag any of them. I just kept pushing the orders as fast as I could. I wanted them out of there. I wanted the day over so I could phone. I was filling the glass coffee pots when I heard it: "Where's Molly?"

They'd never lay off it. Even when I had a crowd, they'd come in. I didn't answer. I switched the burners to *High* and set the pots on the stove.

"Where's Molly?" He said it again. He was needling me.

"I don't know," I said.

He laughed. "That's a good one."

"Yeah," I said. "That's a good one." I picked up the full pot on the end and turned to the counter.

"Hey!" he said. "What's the . . ." It was Frankie Miller, one of my regulars. He'd been on the road with his truck for a week. He didn't know anything about it.

"Coffee," I said. I poured him a cup.

Frankie said, "Look, Joe. I didn't mean anything. If Molly give you the gate—"

"Vacation," I told him. "Keeps me on the jump." I moved away, to the end of the counter. That had been close. I couldn't let it get me like that. It would always be that way, when somebody asked me. It would be worse for Molly, always on edge, tied up inside. I got a picture of her like that, in some strange place, but I couldn't let myself think about that part. I couldn't let myself think beyond the big thing, to make the phone call and see that she got safe out of town. I'd told her I'd phone after supper. By then, they'd

have had time to pull their men out of the stations.

It was nine-thirty before I could make the call. And then I didn't get her. I dialed the number and listened to the buzz. It kept on, unanswered.

It came to me, then, what had probably happened. I was excited and I must have dialed it wrong. I hung up and dialed again. It buzzed twice, and then this fellow came in. He walked up to me at the phone. He said, "Supper?"

I hung up. "Yeah," I said. "Sure. What'll it be?" I went around behind the counter and waited.

"Ham and eggs," he said. He had a quiet, soft voice. He was a trim, small man, with rimless glasses. He carried a fat brief case under his arm. He could have been a lawyer. He sat on the stool and put his case on the counter next to him, watching me.

"You've got a nice place here," he said.

I put a slice of ham in the pan and broke the eggs in with it.

"Good location," he said. "You must run a nice gross."

"How'll you have 'em?" I asked.

He thought it over. "Sunny side up," he decided. He smiled a little.

I got a cup. "Coffee?" I asked him.

"Coffee," he said. "Of course, you've got expenses. You've got taxes and help."

"I make out," I said. I gave him his coffee and turned the heat down under the eggs. "Milk?"

"No," he said. "Insurance, too. Now that runs pretty high. Insurance."

I slid his ham and eggs onto a plate and set it in front of him. "No sale," I said. "I've got plenty."

He laughed. "You've got me wrong," he said. "I'm not selling." He sprinkled salt on his eggs and swallowed a mouthful. "Good eggs," he said. "No. I'm just figuring expenses. You've got to do that—figure what's in it for you."

"I make out," I said.

"Times change," he said. "Expenses go up. Even things like insurance. Right now, you could get a fat price, Joe. I know a party who'd be interested. A smart man knows when to sell out. You look pretty smart, Joe."

"I'm not," I said. "I'm dumb. I'm so dumb I don't even know where she is. You tell Mr. Vance that." I almost screamed it at him. *"I don't know!"*

He cut a piece of ham and chewed on it. "Good ham, too," he said. He pointed his fork at me. "You've got it mixed, Joe. We're not talking about Molly any more. It's *you.*"

He was nuts. I'd told them all I hadn't seen anything. "Look," I said, "I was busy cleaning up. I didn't see him at all."

"Think back, Joe," he said. "You saw him come in. It wasn't Dave Vance. He was a tall, thin man. Middle-aged. They've got the wrong man, Joe."

"Molly described him," I said. "She picked him out."

"Let's forget about Molly," he said. "We won't worry about her any more."

I didn't get it, at first. I had to let it turn over in my mind a couple of times before it clicked into place.

I swung around the counter to the phone. It was no use. I knew it was no use even before I dialed the number. I let it go on buzzing. Molly wasn't there. They'd found her.

I hung up and walked back to the counter. "What do you want?"

"Like I told you. You saw him come in. It wasn't Dave Vance. It was a tall, thin, middle-aged man. You got a good look." He finished the ham. "It'll pay you, Joe. It'll pay off nice."

"What about Molly?"

He shook his head. "It's too late, Joe. We can't do anything about her. This is just you and me."

I guess I'd known it from the beginning. It was like the time Al Vance had been charged with murder and the witness had dropped out of sight. They'd taken care of him, the way they'd take care of Molly. I'd tried to outsmart them. Me, dumb Joe Raymond, had tried to go up against them, and I'd just made it worse.

"You've got to stop them," I said. "You've got to—"

"Wait a minute, son." He slid off the stool. "I can't do anything."

"You've got to."

"Hold it, man. It's too late. It's too . . ."

He must have seen it coming. He said, "Wait a minute . . ." and ducked under my arm toward the door.

He might have made it. He might have gotten away from me, into the street, if the door hadn't opened.

It was the man in brown. The heavy one, with the brown coat and new brown hat. He said, "Something wrong?" He reached out and caught the little man's wrist. "What goes on?"

"They killed her," I said. I took a step forward.

He swung the little man behind him and put a hand on my chest. "Easy," he said. "What's the trouble?"

I knew who he was then. I hadn't thought of it before, but I knew now. He was the man the police had put to watching the diner. That's why he'd come in before, and that's why he'd come in now; both times when Al Vance's men were alone in the place.

"What's the trouble?" he said again.

She wouldn't have been so important, Sergeant Cotter had said, *if you'd just seen him, too.* I knew then what I had to do.

"I want to make a statement," I said.

"Sure," he said. "We'll just run up to Headquarters . . ."

"No," I said. "Now. I want to make a statement *now.*"

He closed the door behind him and walked over to the counter. He spread his bulk on a stool and stretched his arm so the little man could sit on the stool next to him.

"Go ahead," he said.

I gave it to him. I gave it fast, but I didn't leave anything out. I told him now how I'd seen Dave Vance come in, and how I'd recognized him. I told him how, when the shot had come, I'd ducked under the sink.

When I'd finished, he studied me carefully. "You didn't duck down until *after* the shot?" he asked. "That means you saw it all?"

"Yes," I said. "Right from the beginning."

"And you knew Dave Vance?"

"We come from the same neighborhood," I said. "I knew him, all right. That's why I said I didn't see him. I didn't want any trouble."

"That wraps it up," he said. "The sergeant'll like it. Everybody will like it. Except maybe Dave Vance."

The little fellow hadn't said a word.

"Understand," I said, "I'm ready to swear on the stand that it was Dave Vance and that I saw him shoot."

"Fine," the detective said. "Fine. We'll just run up to Headquarters." He looked at the clock on the wall. "I'm due to report. I'll have to phone in, first." He got up, dragging the little man to his feet. "We'll take this one along. The sergeant can decide how to book him."

He walked in front of me, towing the little man after him. He dug a nickel out of his pocket and raised it to the coin slot. He was holding the little man with one hand and the coin with the other when I hit him.

He went down slowly. His head rocked back against the phone and he shook it once, and then he lurched sideways against the little man. He stayed that way a minute, as though the little man were holding him up, and then slid to the floor.

It was the little man's chance to run. That's how I'd figured it; that he'd run out the door as soon as the cop let go of him. He'd phone the Vances and tell them what I'd done. All I'd have to do was wait. This time, they'd come themselves. And this time, Joe Raymond would have a gun.

But the little man didn't run. The little man had the gun. The cop's gun. The one I'd figured on.

"Easy," he said.

I didn't move.

"You played it dumb, Joe," he said.

He didn't have to tell me that. I knew I'd played it dumb. I sat down on one of the counter stools. I didn't say anything. I just sat there.

"You're lucky," the little man said. "You're lucky it's me. I'm a quiet man." He looked down at the cop at his feet. "You're in bad, Joe. You're in bad all around." He reached up and jerked the phone wires loose.

"Joe," he said, "if I were you, I'd

get out of town. In a hurry, Joe. I wouldn't hang around." He backed to the door and opened it with one hand. "I'm sorry, Joe. Those were very good eggs." He slid out and closed the door.

I stayed on the stool, not moving. I knew the little man was right. I was finished. I couldn't wait for them, without a gun. It wouldn't do any good to just let them come in and shoot me. It wouldn't do Molly any good if I did that.

I could go to the police. They'd take my statement and they'd book me for slugging the cop. They'd keep me in custody, while they tried to find the Vances.

But they wouldn't find them. The Vances weren't like Molly and me, playing it alone. They had connections and money. When they came to the diner and found I was gone, they'd go back into hiding until the whole thing blew over. They could even wait until the police let me go, and then take care of me, the way they'd taken care of Molly.

The little man was right. I had to get out of town.

I locked the end door and went back to the rear of the diner, to get my suit coat. I took off my apron and the white jacket and reached up to the hooks.

And on the hook next to mine, I saw Molly's apron.

It hit me then. For the first time, it really hit me. Molly was dead. She was dead because she'd trusted me. She'd said, "It's all right, Joe. I'm not afraid. You'll take care of me." She'd tried to smile through the terror that gripped her and she said, "You'll take care of me, Joe." Now Molly was dead. And the men who had killed her were free.

I knew I couldn't run away. From the others, maybe. But I couldn't run away from Molly.

I put the apron and the white coat back on. I half carried, half dragged, the cop to the little room at the rear. I didn't want him to spoil the show if he came to too fast, so I locked him in the back room and went back to the counter.

The little man's egg plate and coffee cup were still on the counter, next to his brief case. I put the case on the floor and washed up the dishes and set them back on the shelves and then I wiped off the top of the counter, where a little of his coffee had spilled. I wanted everything to look just right. I turned the gas on in the oven and the open broiler and then I picked up a cleaver from the meat board and went up front and sat on the stool by the register.

I couldn't just sit there. I opened the cash register and started stacking the money, counting the day's receipts.

The bills stuck to my fingers. I dried my hands on a towel, but the bills still stuck to them. I gave up and began stacking the quarters, ready for rolls. When I finished, there was one quarter left over.

I fished a cigarette from my pocket

and put it between my lips. I got out a book of matches and slid the quarter inside the cover and laid the box down in front of me.

I started counting the halves.

I had three piles in front of me, when I heard them.

I picked up the matches and cupped them in my hand, ready to light my cigarette. I was sitting like that, with a cigarette in my mouth and matches cupped in my hand, when the door opened.

Their coat collars were turned up almost to their lowered hat brims, but I could still see their eyes. The slim one was Dave Vance, the heavy one was Al, his brother. They slid the door closed and stood with their backs to it. They both had their hands in their pockets.

Dave said, "Hello, Joe."

I didn't answer him.

He came a step forward. "Joe," he said, "we heard you were leaving town. We thought you'd be gone by now. We'd better have a talk, Joe. We'll have to straighten you out."

I still didn't answer him.

"It wouldn't look good, Joe," he said. "Your knowing me makes it bad. That would be worse than the girl's picking me out."

I had trouble with my voice. I had trouble keeping my hands from shaking. I said, "I was just leaving town. I was getting ready to go."

"Sure," he said. "That's what we figured. We brought you a car."

Al Vance said, "Stow it, Dave. It won't work. He don't want to come." He brought his right hand out of his pocket. He knew I wasn't coming along. He raised the gun slowly.

I struck the match and the book burst into flame, scorching my hand. I said, "Damn!" and Dave Vance laughed, a high woman's laugh, and I threw the burning box at the unlighted gas oven.

I didn't see it land. I went down, under the counter. I didn't have to see it land. I heard it, and felt it.

The blast rocked the diner. The windows rattled and dishes cracked on the racks, and then I was over the counter. I forgot the cleaver. I forgot everything but getting my hands on Dave Vance's throat.

Al Vance had caught most of the blast. He was huddled on the floor, his arms spread out. Dave was still on his feet. His eyes were blank and his jaw hung loose, but he was still standing. He shook his head once, trying to clear it, before my fingers closed on his throat.

He was done with killing. I had him. I had him down over the counter and I had my hands on his throat and he couldn't move. He was done with killing. I told him that.

"How do you like it?" I said.

I had him where he could never hurt anyone like Molly again. I had him where he belonged.

They were trying to stop me. Hands clawed at my wrists. Voices shouted in my ears. They wouldn't leave me alone. I had him, and they wouldn't leave me alone.

"Leave me alone," I said. "I've got him!"

There were too many of them. They pried my fingers free and forced me back and away from him.

"Cut it out," they kept shouting.

"Go ahead," I said. "Shoot. Why don't you shoot?"

A hand reached out and slapped my face. A voice kept saying, "Snap out of it, Mac."

The hand kept slapping me, first on one side, then on the other.

"Take him outside," the voice said.

The cold air hit me. I shook my head and then something happened inside me and I doubled up over the gutter. They let go of me and stood there until I was finished. When I straightened up, one of them said, "Okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

Sergeant Cotter was standing in front of the oven. He'd turned off the gas. The detective from the little back room was there, too. They'd turned him loose and, aside from looking pretty mad, he seemed none the worse for wear. There was a uniformed cop at the end of the diner. The Vances were next to him, handcuffed together.

"You trying to kill him?" Sergeant Cotter looked at me. "You just leave that to us, Mac. That's our job."

Their job. Molly had been their job. And Molly was dead. I told him that, bitterly.

He scowled. "People pay us to protect them, and then they lose their heads. You think I'd let those punks snatch the girl?"

I didn't believe him at first. "You?" I said. "*You* found her?"

His scowl spread. "Who else? Them punks? We got a system!"

That's what the little man had meant. They couldn't do anything about Molly. He'd meant the police had her.

"She's all right?" I said.

"Sure, she's all right. But you wouldn't have been if we hadn't missed our man's regular report and come down here to see what was wrong. You had one of them, but the other one was just coming to when we got here. Joe Raymond, too scared to testify, but he tangles with two men with guns."

He grinned suddenly. "Get your coat, Joe. We'll go uptown and take down your statement."

The detective in the brown suit, rubbing his jaw where I'd hit him, grinned at me, too, and winked. He wouldn't cause trouble.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure." I went to the rear of the diner and took off my uniform and slid into my coat. I saw that Molly's apron hadn't been touched by the blast. It was as fresh and clean as when she'd hung it there. I stood there, looking at her apron and my jacket hanging together, and then Sergeant Cotter said, "Shake it up, Joe. We've got to get up to Headquarters pronto. You're keeping a lady waiting."

I shook it up. Fast.

Woman's womb or woman's mind—
which had spawned this monster?
Though faced by double death,
even the doctor could not be sure

SMALL ASSASSIN

RAY BRADBURY

Ancient and honorable in all the arts is the cult of the weird—and generally nurtured, in fiction, by traditionalists. Such authors favor beloved but worn formulas, relying on characters and settings less eerie in themselves than in the fact that over the ages they have become symbols of eerieness. Graveyards. Ghosts. Frankensteins and black cats. Ray forsakes such props. His fresh tales do not merely jell but genuinely curdle. They flow unforced from the milieu all around us, rendered all the more horrible because, so to speak, they are out in broad daylight.

So, though barely thirty, Ray already ranks among the high-priests of the awful. Published originally in that discoverer of so many distinguished weirdmen, Weird Tales, *his work has since appeared in* Harper's, Collier's, American Mercury, Charm *and many other places, including several distinguished "best" collections.*

JUST WHEN the idea occurred to her that she was being murdered she could not tell. There had been little subtle signs, little suspicions for the past month; things as deep as sea tides in her, like looking at a perfectly calm stretch of cerulean water and liking it and wanting to bathe in it, and finding, just as the tide takes your body into it, that monsters dwell just under the surface, things unseen, bloated, many-armed, sharp-finned, malignant and inescapable.

A room floated around her in an effluvium of hysteria. Sharp instruments hovered and there were voices and people in sterile white masks.

My name, she thought. My name; what is it?

Alice Leiber. It came to her. David Leiber's wife. But it gave her no comfort. She was alone with these silent whispering white people and there was great pain and nausea and death-fear in her.

I am being murdered before their eyes. These doctors, these nurses don't realize. David doesn't know. Nobody knows except me and--the killer, the small assassin, the little murderer.

I am dying and I can't tell them how. They'd laugh and call me one in delirium. They'll see the murderer and hold him and like him and they won't think him responsible for my death. Here I am, in front of God and man, dying, and there is no one to believe my story, everyone to doubt me, comfort me with lies, bury me in ignorance, mourn me and salvage my murderer.

Where is David? she wondered. In the outer room, smoking one cigarette after another, listening to the long tickings of the very slow clock?

Sweat exploded from all of her body at once, and with it a crying and agonizing. Now. Now! Try and kill me, she screamed. Try, try, but I won't die! I won't!

There was a hollow in her. A vacuity. Suddenly there was no pain. Exhaustion. Blackness. It was over. It was all over. Oh, God. She plummeted rapidly down and struck against a black nothingness which gave way to another nothing and another nothing and another and still another. . . .

Footsteps. Gentle, approaching footsteps. The sound of people trying to be quiet.

Far away, a voice said, "She's asleep. Don't disturb her."

An odor of tweeds, a pipe, a certain shaving lotion. She knew David was standing over her. And beyond him the immaculate odor of Dr. Jeffers.

She did not open her eyes. "I'm awake," she said, quietly. It was a surprise, a relief to be able to speak, to not be dead.

"Alice," someone said, and it was David beyond her closed eyes, his hands holding one of her tired ones.

Would you like to meet the murderer, David? she thought. That's who you're here to see now, aren't you?

David stood over her. She opened her eyes. The room came into focus. Moving a weak hand she pulled aside a coverlet.

The murderer looked up at David Leiber with a small red-faced, blue-eyed calm. Its eyes were deep and sparkling.

"Why!" cried David Leiber, smiling. "Why, he's a *fine* baby!"

Dr. Jeffers was waiting for David

Leiber the day he showed up at the hospital to take his wife and new child home. He motioned Leiber into a chair in his office, gave him a cigar, lit one for himself, sat on the edge of his desk, puffing solemnly. Then he cleared his throat, looked David Leiber straight in the eye and said, "Your wife doesn't like her child, Dave."

"What!"

"It's been a hard thing for her. The whole thing. She'll need a lot of love in this next year. I didn't say much at the time, but she was hysterical in the delivery room. The strange things she said! Now, this may be simply a thing we can clear up with one or two questions." He sucked on his cigar. "Is this child a 'wanted' child, Dave?"

"Yes. It was planned. We planned it together. Alice was so happy, a year ago, when—"

"Mmm—that makes it more difficult. Because if the child was unplanned, it would be a simple case of a mother who hates the idea of motherhood. That doesn't fit Alice." Dr. Jeffers took his cigar from his lips, rubbed his hand across his jaw. "It must be something else, then. Perhaps something buried in her childhood that's coming out now. Or it might be the simple temporary doubt and distrust of any mother who's gone through the unusual pain and near-death that Alice has. If so, then a little time should heal that. But if things don't get along, the three of you drop in on me. I'm always glad to see old friends, eh? Here, take another cigar along for —ah—for the baby."

It was a bright spring afternoon. Their car hummed along wide, tree-lined boulevards. Blue sky, flowers, a warm wind. Dave talked a lot, lit his cigar, talked some more. Alice answered directly, softly, relaxing a bit more as the trip progressed. But she held the baby not tightly enough or motherly enough to satisfy the queer ache in Dave's mind. She seemed to be carrying merely a porcelain figurine.

He tried joviality. "What'll we name him?" he asked.

Alice Leiber watched green trees slide by. "Let's not name him yet," she said. "I'd rather wait until we get an exceptional name for him. Don't blow smoke in his face." Her sentences ran together with no distinction of tone between one or the other. The last statement held no motherly reproof, no interest, no irritation. She just mouthed it and it was said.

The husband, disquieted, dropped the cigar from the window. "Sorry."

The baby rested in the crook of its mother's arm, shadows of sun and tree changing its face over and again. His blue eyes opened like fresh blue spring flowers. Moist noises came from the tiny, pink, elastic mouth.

Alice gave her baby a quick glance. Her husband felt her shiver against him.

"Cold?" he asked.

"A chill. Better raise the window, David."

It was more than a chill. He rolled the window thoughtfully up.

Suppertime.

David Leiber had brought the child from the nursery, propped him at a tiny bewildered angle, supported by many pillows, in a newly purchased high-chair.

Alice watched her knife and fork move. "He's not high-chair size," she said.

"Fun having him here, anyway," said Leiber, feeling fine. "Everything's fun. At the office, too. Orders up to my nose. If I don't watch myself I'll make another fifteen thousand this year. Hey, look at Junior, will you? Drooling all down his chin!" He reached over to dab at the baby's chin with his napkin. From the corner of his eye he realized that Alice wasn't even watching. He finished the job.

"I guess it wasn't very interesting," he said, back again at his food. A minor irritation rose in him, disregarding all self-argument. "But one would think a mother'd take some interest in her own child!"

Alice jerked her chin up. "Don't speak that way. Not in front of him! Later, if you must."

"Later?" he cried. "In front of, in back of, what's the difference?" He quieted suddenly, swallowed, was sorry. "All right. Okay. I know how it is."

After dinner she let him carry the baby upstairs. She didn't tell him to; she *let* him.

Coming down, he found her standing by the radio, listening to music she wasn't hearing. Her eyes were closed, her whole attitude one of wondering, self-questioning.

Suddenly she was at him, against him, soft, quick; the same. Nothing different. Her lips found him, kept him. He was stunned by her. He laughed unexpectedly, and deeply. Now that the baby was gone, upstairs, out of the room, she had begun to breathe again, live again. She was free. She was whispering, rapidly, endlessly.

"Thank you, thank you, darling. For being yourself, always. Dependable, so very dependable!"

He had to laugh. "My father told me, 'Son, provide for your family!' "

Wearily, she rested her dark, shining hair against his neck. "You've overdone it. Sometimes I wish we were just the way we were when we were first married. No responsibilities, nothing but ourselves. No—no babies."

She took him too eagerly by the hand, a flushed strangeness in her white face, unnaturally intense.

"A third element's come in. Before, it was just you and me. We protected each other, and now we protect the baby, but get no protection from it. Do you understand? Lying in the hospital I had time to think a lot of things. The world is evil—"

"Is it?" he said.

"Yes. But laws protect us from it. And when there aren't laws, then love does the protecting. You're protected from my hurting you, by my love. You're vulnerable to me, of all people, but love shields you. I feel no fear of you, because love cushions all your irritations, unnatural instincts, hatreds and immaturities. But—what about the baby? It's too young to know love, or a law of love, or anything, until we teach it. And in the meantime be vulnerable to it!"

"Vulnerable? To a baby?" He held her away from him and laughed gently.

"Does a baby know the difference between right and wrong?" she asked.

"No. But it'll learn."

"But a baby is so new, so amoral, so conscience-free," she argued. She stopped. Her arms dropped from him and she turned swiftly. "That noise? What was it?"

Leiber looked around the room. "I didn't hear—"

She stared at the library door. "In there," she said, slowly.

Leiber crossed the room and opened the door and switched the library lights off and on. "Not a thing," he said, and came back to her. "You're worn. To bed with you; right now."

Turning out the lights together, they walked quietly up the soundless hall stairs, not speaking. At the top she apologized. "My wild talk, darling. Forgive me. I'm just exhausted."

He understood, and said so.

She paused, undecided, by the nursery door. Then she fingered the brass knob sharply, walked in. He watched her approach the crib much too carefully, look down, and stiffen as if she had been struck in the face. "David!"

Leiber stepped forward, reached the crib.

The baby's face was bright red and very moist. The little pink mouth gestured. Bright blue eyes stared as if being strangled outward. Small red hands weaved in the air.

"Oh, he's just been crying," said Leiber.

"Has he?" Alice Leiber grasped the crib-railing to hold herself erect. "I didn't *hear* him crying."

"The door was closed."

"Is that why he breathes so hard, why his face is red?"

"Sure. Poor little guy. Crying all alone in the dark. He can sleep in our room tonight, just in case he cries."

"You'll spoil him," his wife said.

Leiber felt her eyes follow as he rolled the crib into their bedroom. He undressed silently, sat on the edge of the bed. Suddenly he lifted his head, swore under his breath, snapped his fingers. "Damn it. Forgot to tell you. Have to fly to Chicago Friday."

"Oh, David." She seemed a little lost girl. "So soon?"

"I've put this trip off for two months, and now it's so critical I just *have* to make it."

"I'm afraid to be alone."

"We'll have the new cook here by Friday. She'll be here all the time. All you have to do is call. I'll only be away a little while."

"But I'm afraid. I don't know of what. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I guess I'm crazy."

He was in bed now. She darkened the room; he heard her walk around the bed, throw back crisp sheets, slide in. He smelled the warm woman smell of her next to him. He said, "If you want me to wait a few extra days, perhaps I could—"

"No," she said, unconvinced. "You go. I know it's important. It's just that I keep thinking about what I told you. Laws and love and protection. Love protects you from me. But, the baby—" She took a breath. "What protects you from him, David?"

Before he could answer, before he could tell her how silly it was, speaking of infants, she switched on the bed light.

"Look," she said, pointing.

The baby lay wide awake in its crib, staring straight at him, with deep, sharp, blue eyes.

The lights went out again. She trembled against him.

"It's not nice, being afraid of the thing you birthed." Her whisper lowered, became harsh, fierce, swift. "He tried to kill me! He lies there, listens to us talking, waiting for you to go away so he can try to kill me again! I swear it!"

Sobs broke from her. "Please," he kept saying, soothing her. "Stop it, stop it. Please."

She cried in the dark for a long time. Very late she relaxed, shakingly, against him. Her breathing came soft, warm, regular, her body twitched its worn reflexes and she slept.

He drowsed.

And just before his eyes lidded wearily down, sinking into the deep sleep tides, he heard a strange little sound of awareness and awakeness in the room.

The sound of moist, small, pinkly elastic lips.

The baby.

And then—sleep.

In the morning, the sun blazed. Alice smiled.

David Leiber dangled his watch over the crib. "See, baby? Something bright. Something pretty. Sure. Sure. Something bright. Something pretty."

Alice smiled. She told him to go ahead, fly to Chicago, she'd try to be a brave girl, no need to worry.

The airplane went east with Leiber. There was a lot of sky, a lot of sun and clouds, and then Chicago came running over the horizon. Leiber dropped into the rush of ordering, planning, banqueting, making the rounds, telephoning, arguing in conference, downing coffee in scalding gulps between times. But he wrote letters each day and sent telegrams that said brief, nice, direct things to Alice, and baby.

On the evening of his sixth day away he received the long distance call. Los Angeles.

"Alice?"

"No, Dave. This is Jeffers."

"Doctor!"

"Hold onto yourself, son. Alice is sick. You'd better get the next plane home. It's pneumonia. I'll do everything I can, boy. If only it wasn't so soon after the baby. She needs strength."

Leiber dropped the phone into its cradle. The hotel room blurred and fell apart.

"Alice," he said, blindly, starting for the door.

The airplane went west and California came up, and to Leiber, home, came a vibratingly sudden materialization of Alice lying in bed, Dr. Jeffers standing in the sunlight at a window, and the reality of Leiber feeling his feet walking slowly, becoming more real and more real, until, when he reached her bed, everything was whole, intact, a reality.

Nobody spoke. Alice smiled, faintly. Jeffers talked, but only a little of it got through to David.

"Your wife's too good a mother, son. She worried more about your baby than herself!"

A muscle in Alice's cheek flattened out, taut, then—

Alice began to talk. She talked like a mother should, now. Or did she? Wasn't there a trace of anger, fear, repulsion in her voice?

"The baby wouldn't sleep," said Alice. "I thought he was sick. He just lay in his crib, staring. Late at night, he'd cry. Loud. He cried all night and all night. I couldn't quiet him. I couldn't sleep."

Dr. Jeffers nodded. "Tired herself right into pneumonia. But she's full of sulfa now, and she's on the safe side."

Leiber felt ill. "The baby, what about *him*?"

"Chipper as ever; healthy as a cock."

"Thanks, doctor."

The doctor took leave, walked down the stairs, opened the front door faintly, and was gone. Leiber listened to him go.

"David!"

He turned to her whisper.

"It was the baby, again," she said. "I try to lie to myself—convince myself I'm a fool. But the baby knew I was weak from the hospital. So he cried all night. And when he wasn't crying he'd be *too* quiet. If I switched the light on he'd be there, staring."

Leiber jerked inside. He remembered seeing the baby, awake in the dark, himself. Awake very late at night when babies should sleep. He pushed it aside. It was crazy.

Alice went on. "I was going to kill the baby. Yes, I was. When you'd been gone only an hour on your trip I went to his room and put my hands about his neck, and I stood there, for a long time, thinking, afraid. Then I put the covers up over his face and turned him over on his

face and pressed him down and left him that way and ran out of the room."

He tried to stop her.

"No, let me finish," she said, hoarsely, looking at the wall. "When I left his room I thought, it's simple. Babies die every day of smothering. No one'll ever know. But when I came back to see him dead, David, he was alive! Yes, alive, turned over on his back, alive and smiling and breathing. And I couldn't touch him again after that. Perhaps the cook tended to him. I don't know. All I know is that his crying kept me awake and I thought all through the night, and walked around the rooms and now I'm sick." She was almost finished now. "The baby lies there and thinks of ways to kill me."

She was through. She collapsed inward on herself and finally slept. David Leiber stood for a long while over her. His brain was frozen in his head, not a cell of it stirred.

The next morning there was only one thing to do. He walked into Dr. Jeffers' office and told him the whole thing, and listened to Jeffers' tolerant replies:

"Let's take this thing slowly, son. It's quite natural for mothers to hate their children, sometimes. We have a label for it—ambivalence. The ability to hate, while loving. Lovers hate each other, frequently. Children detest their mothers—"

Leiber interrupted. "I never hated *my* mother."

"You won't admit it, naturally. People hate admitting hatred for loved ones."

"So Alice hates her baby."

"The best way to put it is that she has an obsession. She's gone a step further than plain, ordinary ambivalence. She blames the child for her near-death and her pneumonia. She's projecting her troubles, blaming them on the handiest object she can use as a source of blame. We *all* do it. We stumble into a chair and curse the furniture, not our own clumsiness. We miss a golf-stroke and damn the turf or our club. All I can tell you is what I told you before. Find little ways of showing your affection. Find ways of showing her how harmless and innocent the child is. After a while, she'll settle down and begin to love the kid. If she doesn't come around in the next month or so, ask me and I'll recommend a good psychiatrist. Go on along now, and take that look off your face."

When summer came, things seemed to settle and become easy. Leiber never forgot to be thoughtful of his wife. She, in turn, took long walks, gained strength. She rarely burst out emotionally any more.

But on one certain midnight when a sudden summer wind swept around the house, shaking the trees like so many shining tamborines, Alice wakened, trembling, and slid over into her husband's arms.

She said, "Something's here in the room, watching us."

He switched on the light. "Dreaming again," he said. "You're better, though. Haven't been scared for a long time."

She sighed as he clicked off the light again. He held her, considering what a sweet, weird creature she was.

Then he heard the bedroom door sway open a few inches.

There was nobody at the door. No reason for it to come open. The wind had died.

He waited. It seemed like an hour he lay silently, in the dark.

Then, far away, wailing like some small meteor dying in the vast inky gulf of space, the baby began to cry in his nursery.

It was a small, lonely sound in the middle of the dark and the breathing of this woman in his arms and the wind beginning to sweep through the trees again.

Leiber counted to fifty. The crying continued.

Finally, carefully disengaging Alice's grip, he slipped from bed, put on his slippers, tiptoed out of the room.

He'd go downstairs, he thought tiredly, and fix some warm milk, and—

The blackness dropped out from under him. His foot slipped and plunged. Plunged into nothingness . . .

He thrust his hands out, caught frantically at the railing. His body stopped falling. He cursed.

Something soft had caused his feet to slip. It rustled and thumped down a few steps and stopped. His head rang. His heart hammered at the base of his throat, thick and shot with pain.

Why do people leave things strewn about a house? He groped with his fingers for the object that had almost spilled him headlong down the stairs.

His hand froze, startled. His breath went in.

The thing he held in his hand was a toy. A large cumbersome, patchwork doll he had brought as a joke, for—

For the baby.

Alice drove him to work the next day.

She slowed the car halfway downtown; pulled to the curb and stopped it. Then she turned on the seat and looked at her husband.

"I want to go away on a vacation. I don't know if you can make it now, darling, but, if not, please let me go alone. We can get someone to take care of the baby, I'm sure. But I just have to get away. I thought I was growing out of this—this *feeling*. But I'm not. I can't stand being in the room with him. He looks up at me as if he hates me too. I want to get away before something happens."

He got out on his side of the car, came around, motioned to her to move over, got in. "The only thing you're going to do is see a good psychiatrist. And if he suggests a

vacation, well, okay. But this can't go on; my stomach's in knots all the time." He started the car. "I'll drive."

Her head was down; she was trying to keep back tears. She looked up when they reached his office-building. "All right. Make the appointment. I'll go talk to anyone you want, David."

He stood on the curb, watching her drive off, the wind taking hold of her long dark, shining hair. Upstairs, a minute later, he phoned Jeffers, got an appointment arranged with a reliable psychiatrist. That was *that.*

The day's work went uneasily. Things seemed to tangle and he kept seeing Alice all the time, mixed into everything he looked at. So much of her fear had come over into him. She actually had *him* convinced that the child was somewhat unnatural. At the end of the day he was all exhaustion, and nothing else. His head throbbed. He was very willing to go home.

On the way down in the elevator he wondered, what if I told Alice about that toy I stumbled over on the stairs? Lord, wouldn't *that* send her off into hysterics! No, I won't ever tell her. After all, it was just one of those accidents.

Daylight lingered in the sky as he drove home in a taxi. In front of his Brentwood home he paid the driver and walked slowly up the cement walk, enjoying the light that was still in the sky. The white colonial front to the house looked unnaturally silent and uninhabited, and then, quietly, he remembered that this was Thursday, and the cook's day off, and he and Alice would have to scriven for themselves or else eat on the Strip somewhere.

He took a deep breath of air. Traffic moved on the boulevard a block away. He turned the key in the door.

He stepped in, put his hat on the chair with his briefcase, started to shrug out of his coat, then looked up.

Late sunlight streamed down the stairwell from the window at the top of the house. Where the sunlight landed it took on the bright color of the patchwork doll still sprawled in a grotesque angle at the bottom of the stairs.

But he paid no attention to the patchwork doll.

He could only look, and not move, and look again at Alice.

Alice lay in a broken, grotesque, pallid gesturing and angling of her thin body. She was lying at the bottom of the stairs.

Alice was dead.

The house remained quiet, except for the sound of his heart.

She was dead.

He held her head in his hands, he felt of her fingers. He held her body. But she wouldn't live. He said her name, out loud, many times, and he tried, once again, by holding her to him to give her back some of the warmth she had lost, but that didn't help.

He stood up. He must have made a phone call. He didn't remember.

He found himself, suddenly, upstairs. He opened the nursery door and walked inside and stared blankly at the crib. His stomach was sick. He couldn't see very well.

The baby's eyes were closed, but his face was red, moist with perspiration, as if he'd been crying long and hard.

"She's dead," said Leiber to the baby. "She's dead."

Then he started laughing. He was still laughing when Dr. Jeffers walked in and slapped him again and again across his cheeks.

"Snap out of it! Pull yourself together, son!"

"She fell down the stairs, doctor. She tripped on a patchwork doll and fell. I almost slipped on it the other night, myself. And now—"

The doctor shook him.

"Doc, doc, doc," said Leiber, hazily. "Funny thing. Funny. I-I finally thought of a name for the baby."

The doctor said nothing.

Leiber put his head back in his trembling hands and spoke the words. "I'm going to have him christened next Sunday. Know what name I'm giving him? I'm-I'm going to call him—*Lucifer*!"

It was eleven at night. A lot of strange people had come and gone through the house, taking the essential flame with them—Alice.

David Leiber sat across from the doctor in the library.

"Alice wasn't crazy," he said slowly. "She had good reason to fear the baby."

Jeffers exhaled. "Now you're following in her pattern. She blamed the child for her sickness, now *you* blame it for her death. She stumbled on a toy, remember that. You can't blame the child."

"You mean Lucifer?"

"Stop calling him Lucifer!"

Leiber shook his head. "Alice heard things at night. As if someone spied on us. You want to know what those noises were, doctor? I'll tell you. They were made by the baby! Yes, *my* son! Four months old, creeping around the dark halls at night, listening to us talk. Listening to *every word*!" He held to the sides of the chair. "And if I turned the lights on, a baby is a small object. It can conveniently hide behind furniture, a door, against a wall—below eye-level."

"I want you to stop this!" demanded Jeffers.

"Let me say what I think or I'll go crazy. When I went to Chicago, who was it kept Alice awake, tiring her, weakening her into pneumonia? The baby! And when Alice didn't die, then he tried killing me. It was simple; leave a toy doll on the stairs, then cry in the night until your father rouses up, tired of listening to you cry, and goes downstairs to fetch you warm milk, and stumbles. A crude trick, but effective. It didn't get me. But it killed Alice quite dead."

David Leiber stopped long enough to light a cigarette. "I should have caught on. I'd turn on the lights in

the middle of the night, many nights, and the baby'd be lying there, eyes wide. Most babies sleep constantly, all the time. Not *this* one. He stayed awake—thinking."

"Babies don't think," countered Jeffers.

"He stayed awake doing whatever he *could* do with his brain, then. What in hell do we know about a baby's brain? He had every reason to hate Alice; she suspected him for what he was—certainly not a normal child."

Leiber leaned toward the doctor, tiredly. "It all ties up. Suppose a few babies out of all the millions are born instantaneously able to move, see, hear, think. Many insects are self-sufficient when born. In a few days most mammals and birds are adjusted. Little man-children take years to speak, faltering around on rubbery legs.

"But, suppose one child in a million is—strange? Born perfectly aware, able to think, instinctively. Wouldn't it be a perfect set-up, a perfect blind for anything the baby might want to do? He could pretend to be ordinary, weak, crying, ignorant. With just a *little* expenditure of energy he could crawl about a darkened house, listening. And how easy to place obstacles at the top of stairs. How easy to cry all night and tire a mother into pneumonia. How easy, right at birth, to be so close to the mother that *a few deft maneuvers might cause peritonitis*!"

"For God's sake!" Jeffers was on his feet. "That's a repulsive thing to say!"

"It's a repulsive thing I'm speaking of. How many mothers have died at the birth of their children? How many have suckled strange little improbabilities who caused death one way or another? Strange, red little creatures with brains that function in a scarlet darkness we can't even guess at. Elemental little brains, a-swarm with racial memory and hatred and raw cruelty. I ask you, doctor, what is there in the world more selfish than a baby? Nothing! Nothing is so self-centered unsocial, selfish—nothing!"

Jeffers scowled and shook his head helplessly.

Leiber dropped his cigarette down, weakly. "I'm not claiming any great strength for the child. Just enough to listen all the time. Just enough to cry late at night. That's enough, more than enough."

Jeffers tried ridicule. "Call it murder, then. And murder must have a motivation. Name a motivation for the child."

Leiber was ready with the answer. "What is more at peace, more dreamfully happy, content, at ease, at rest, fed, comforted unbothered than an unborn child? Nothing. It floats in a sleepy dark swirl of timeless wonder and warm nourishment and silence. All is an enclosed dream. Then, suddenly, it is asked to give up its berth, is forced to vacate, propelled out into a noisy, uncaring, selfish, swift and merciless world to

hunt, to feed from the hunting, to seek after a vanishing love that once was its unquestionable right, to meet confusion instead of inner silence and conservative slumber! And the newborn *resents* it! Resents it with all the soft, small fibres of its miniature body. Resents the raw cold air, the huge spaces, the sudden departure from familiar things. And who is responsible for this disenchantment, this rude breakage of the spell? The mother. And so the new child has someone to hate, and hate with all the tiny fabric of its mind. The mother has cast it out, rejected it. And the father is no better, kill him, too! He's responsible in *his* way!"

Jeffers interrupted. "If what you say is true, then every woman in the world would have to look on her newborn as something to dread, something to shudder at"

"And why not? Hasn't the child a perfect alibi? He has a thousand years of accepted medical belief to protect him. By all natural accounts he is helpless, not responsible. The child is born hating. And things grow worse, instead of better. At first the baby gets a certain amount of attention and mothering. But then as time passes, things change. When very new, a baby has great power. Power to make parents do silly things when it cries or sneezes, jump when it makes a noise. As the months pass, the baby feels even that little power slipping rapidly, forever away from it, never to return. Why shouldn't it grasp for all the power it can have, why shouldn't it jockey for position while it has all the advantages? In later years it would be too late to express its hatred. *Now* would be the time to strike."

Leiber's voice was very soft, very low.

"My little boy baby, lying in his crib nights, his face moist and red and out of breath. From crying? No. From climbing tediously, achingly slow, out of his crib, from crawling long distances through darkened hallways. My little boy baby. I want to kill him."

The doctor handed him a water glass and some pills. "You're not killing anyone. You're going to sleep for twenty-four hours. Sleep'll change your mind. Take this."

Leiber drank down the pills and let himself be led upstairs to his bedroom, crying, and felt himself being put to bed.

The next morning, Dr. Jeffers drove up to the Leiber house. It was a good morning, and he was here to tell Leiber to get out into the country for a rest. Leiber would still be asleep upstairs. Jeffers had given him enough sedative to knock him out for at least fifteen hours.

He rang the doorbell. No answer. The servant hadn't returned; too early. Jeffers tried the front door, found it open, stepped in. He put his medical kit on the nearest chair.

Something white moved out of view at the top of the stairs. Just a suggestion of a movement. Jeffers

hardly noticed it.

The odor of gas was in the house.

Jeffers ran up the stairs, crashed into Leiber's bedroom.

Leiber lay on the bed, not moving, and the room billowed with gas, which hissed from a released jet at the base of the wall near the door. Jeffers twisted it off, then forced up all the windows and ran back to Leiber's body.

The body was cold. It had been dead quite a few hours.

Coughing violently, the doctor hurried from the room, eyes watering. Leiber hadn't turned the gas on himself. He *couldn't* have. Those sedatives had knocked him out, he wouldn't have wakened until noon. It wasn't suicide. Or was there the faintest possibility?

Jeffers stood in the hall for five minutes. Then he walked to the door of the nursery. It was shut. He opened it. He walked inside and over to the crib.

The crib was empty.

He stood swaying over the crib for half a minute, then he said something to nobody in particular.

"The nursery door blew shut. You couldn't get back into your crib where it was safe. You didn't plan on the door blowing shut. A little thing like a slammed door can ruin the best of plans. I'll find you somewhere in the house, hiding, pretending to be something you are not." The doctor looked dazed. He put his hand to his head and smiled palely. "Now I'm talking like Alice and David talked. But, I can't take any chances. I'm not sure of anything, but I can't take any chances."

He walked downstairs, opened his medical bag upon the chair, took something out of it and held it in his hands.

Something rustled down the hall. Something very small and very quiet. Jeffers turned rapidly. He took half a dozen quick, sure steps forward into the hall.

"I had to operate to bring you into this world. Now I guess I can operate to . . ."

THE QUICK AND THE BOMB

WILLIAM TENN

William Tenn was born in London, shortly after the League of Nations. "My first boughten story" he says, "was written during a period of employment by the U. S. government as a radar and radio expert, which I am not and never said I was." While clearing up minefields in France during the last war he acquired a hobby: worrying about the next war. Now a full-time writer, he lives in New York in an apartment house which he is rapidly undermining.

A fanatic was he? What did a beating or two matter, with Hell just around the corner? A prophet of doom could lick tomorrow's terror!

THAT WAS the day Plunkett heard his wife screaming guardedly to their youngest boy.

He let the door of the laying house slam behind him, forgetful of the nervously feeding hens. She had, he realized, cupped her hands over her mouth so that only the boy would hear.

"Saul! You, *Saul!* Come back, come right back this instant. Do you want your father to catch you out there on the road? Saul!"

The last shriek was higher and clearer, as if she had despaired of attracting the boy's attention without at the same time warning the man.

Poor Ann!

Gently, rapidly, Plunkett *shh'd* his way through the bustling and hungry hens to the side door. He came out facing the brooder run and broke

into a heavy, unathletic trot.

They have the responsibility after Ann and me, Plunkett told himself. Let them watch and learn again. He heard the other children clatter out of the feed house. Good!

"Saul!" his wife's voice shrilled unhappily. "Saul, your father's coming!"

Ann came out of the front door and paused. "Elliot," she called at his back as he leaped over the flush well-cover. "Please. I don't feel well."

A difficult pregnancy, of course, and in her sixth month. But that had nothing to do with Saul. Saul knew better.

At the last frozen furrow of the truck garden Plunkett gave himself a moment to gather the necessary air for his lungs. Years ago, when Von Rundstedt's Tigers roared through the Bulge, he would have been able to dig a fox-hole after such a run. Now, he was just winded. Just showed you: such a short distance from the far end of the middle chicken house to the far end of the vegetable garden—merely crossing four acres—and he was winded. And consider the practice he'd had.

He could just about see the boy idly lifting a stick to throw for the dog's pleasure. Saul was in the further ditch, well past the white line his father had painted across the road.

"Elliot," his wife began again. "He's only six years old. He—"

Plunkett drew his jaws apart and let breath out in a bellyful of sound. "Saul! Saul Plunkett!" he bellowed. "Start running!"

He knew his voice had carried. He clicked the button on his stopwatch and threw his right arm up, pumping his clenched fist.

The boy *had* heard the yell. He turned, and, at the sight of the moving arm that meant the stopwatch had started, he dropped the stick. But, for the fearful moment, he was too startled to move.

Eight seconds. He lifted his lids slightly. Saul had begun to run. But he hadn't picked up speed, and Rusty skipping playfully between his legs threw him off his stride.

Ann had crossed the garden laboriously and stood at his side, alternately staring over his jutting elbow at the watch and smiling hesitantly sidewise at his face. She shouldn't have come out in her thin house-dress in November. But it was good for Ann. Plunkett kept his eyes stolidly on the unemotional second hand.

One minute forty.

He could hear the dog's joyful barks coming closer, but as yet there was no echo of sneakers slapping the highway. Two minutes. He wouldn't make it.

The old bitter thoughts came crowding back to Plunkett. A father timing his six-year-old son's speed with the best watch he could afford. This, then, was the scientific way to raise children in Earth's most enlightened era. Well, it was scientific . . .in keeping with the very latest discoveries. . . .

Two and a half minutes. Rusty's barks didn't sound so very far off. Plunkett could hear the desperate pad-pad-pad of the boy's feet. He might make it at that. If only he could!

"*Hurry*, S a u l," h i s m o t h e r breathed. "You can make it."

Plunkett looked up in time to see his son pound past, his jeans already darkened with perspiration. "Why doesn't he breathe like I told him?" he muttered. "He'll be out of breath in no time."

Halfway to the house, a furrow caught at Saul's toes. As he sprawled, Ann gasped. "You can't count that, Elliot. He tripped."

"Of course he tripped. He should count on tripping."

"Get up, Saulie," Herbie, his older brother, screamed from the garage where he stood with Louise Dawkins, the pail of eggs still between them. "Get up and run! This corner here! You can make it!"

The boy weaved to his feet, and threw his body forward again. Plunkett could hear him sobbing. He reached the cellar steps—and literally plunged down.

Plunkett pressed the stopwatch and the second hand halted. Three minutes thirteen seconds.

He held the watch up for his wife to see. "Thirteen seconds, Ann."

Her face wrinkled.

He walked to the house. Saul crawled back up the steps, fragments of unrecovered breath rattling in his chest. He kept his eyes on his father.

"Come here, Saul. Come right here. Look at the watch. Now, what do you see?"

The boy stared intently at the watch. His lips began twisting; startled tears writhed down his stained face. "More—more than three m-minutes, poppa?"

"More than three minutes, Saul. Now, Saul—don't cry son; it isn't any use—Saul, what would have happened when you got to the steps?"

A small voice, pitifully trying to cover its cracks: "The big doors would be shut."

"The big doors would be shut. You would be locked outside. Then what would have happened to you? Stop crying. Answer me!"

"Then, when the bombs fell, I'd—I'd have no place to hide. I'd burn like the head of a match. An'—an' the only thing left of me would be a dark spot on the ground, shaped like my shadow. An'—an'—"

"And the radioactive dust," his father helped with the catechism.

"Elliot—" Ann sobbed behind him, "I don't—"

"*Please*, Ann! And the radioactive dust, son?"

"An' if it was ra-di-o-ac-tive dust 'stead of atom bombs, my skin would come right off my body, an' my lungs would burn up inside me—please, poppa, I won't do it again!"

"And your eyes? What would happen to your eyes?"

A chubby brown fist dug into one of the eyes. "An' my eyes would fall

out, an' my teeth would fall out, and I'd feel such terrible terrible pain—"

"All over you and inside you. That's what would happen if you got to the cellar too late when the alarm went off, if you got locked out. At the end of three minutes, we pull the levers, and no matter who's outside—*no matter who*—all four corner doors swing shut and the cellar will be sealed. You understand that, Saul?"

The two Dawkins children were listening with white faces and dry lips. Their parents had brought them from the city and begged Elliot Plunkett as he remembered old friends to give their children the same protection as his. Well, they were getting it. This was the way to get it.

"Yes, I understand it, poppa. I won't ever do it again. Never again."

"I hope you won't. Now, start for the barn, Saul. Go ahead." Plunkett slid his heavy leather belt from its loops.

"Elliot! Don't you think he understands the horrible thing? A beating won't make it any clearer."

He paused behind the weeping boy trudging to the barn. "It won't make it any clearer, but it will teach him the lesson another way. All seven of us are going to be in that cellar three minutes after the alarm, if I have to wear this strap clear down to the buckle!"

When Plunkett later clumped into the kitchen with his heavy farm boots, he stopped and sighed.

Ann was feeding Dinah. With her eyes on the baby, she asked, "No supper for him, Elliot?"

"No supper." He sighed again. "It does take it out of a man."

"Especially you. Not many men would become a farmer at thirty-five. Not many men would sink every last penny into an underground fort and powerhouse, just for insurance. But you're right."

"I only wish," he said restlessly, "that I could work out some way of getting Nancy's heifer into the cellar. And if eggs stay high one more month I can build the tunnel to the generator. Then, there's the well. Only one well, even if it's enclosed—"

"And when we came out here seven years ago—" She rose to him at last and rubbed her lips gently against his thick blue shirt. "We only had a piece of ground. Now, we have three chicken houses, a thousand broilers, and I can't keep track of how many layers and breeders."

She stopped as his body tightened and he gripped her shoulders.

"Ann, *Ann!* If you think like that, you'll act like that! How can I expect the children to—Ann, what we have—all we have—is a five room cellar, concrete-lined, which we can seal in a few seconds, an enclosed well from a fairly deep underground stream, a windmill generator for power and a sunken oil-burner-driven generator for emergencies. We have supplies to carry us through, geiger counters to detect

radiation and lead-lined suits to move about in—afterwards. I've told you again and again that these things are our lifeboat, and the farm is just a sinking ship.

"Of course, darling." Plunkett's teeth ground together, then parted helplessly as his wife went back to feeding Dinah, the baby.

"You're perfectly right. Swallow now, Dinah. Why, that last bulletin from the Survivors Club would make *anybody* think."

He had been quoting from the October *Survivor,* and Ann had recognized it. Well? At least they were *doing* something—seeking out nooks and feverishly building crannies—pooling their various ingenuities in an attempt to haul themselves and their families through the military years of the Atomic Age.

The familiar green cover of the mimeographed magazine was very noticeable on the kitchen table. He flipped the sheets to the thumb-smudged article on page five and shook his head.

"Imagine!" he said loudly. "The poor fools agreeing with the government again on the safety factor. Six minutes! How can they—an organization like the Survivors Club making that their official opinion! Why freeze, *freeze* alone. . . ."

"They're ridiculous," Ann murmured, scraping the bottom of the bowl.

"All right, we have automatic detectors. But human beings still have to look at the radar scope, or we'd be diving underground every time there's a meteor shower."

He strode along a huge table, beating a fist rhythmically into one hand. "They won't be so sure, at first. Who wants to risk his rank by giving the nationwide signal that makes everyone in the country pull ground over his head, that makes our own projectile sites set to buzz? Finally, they are certain: they freeze for a moment. Meanwhile, the rockets are zooming down—how fast, we don't know. The men unfreeze, they trip each other up, they tangle frantically. *Then,* they press the button; *then,* the nationwide signal starts our radio alarms.

Plunkett turned to his wife, spread earnest, quivering arms. "And then, Ann, *we* freeze when we hear it! At last, we start for the cellar. Who knows, who can dare to say, how much has been cut off the margin of safety by that time? No, if they claim that six minutes is the safety factor, we'll give half of it to the alarm system. Three minutes for us."

"One more spoonful," Ann urged Dinah. "Just one more. *Down* it goes!"

JOSEPHINE DAWKINS and Herbie were cleaning the feed trolley in the shed at the near end of the chicken house.

"All done, pop," the boy grinned at his father. "And the eggs taken care of. When does Mr. Whiting pick 'em up?"

"Nine o'clock. Did you finish feeding the hens in the last house?"

"I said all done, didn't I?" Herbie asked with adolescent impatience. "When I say a thing, I mean it."

"Good. You kids better get at your books. Hey, stop that! Education will be very important, afterwards. You never know what will be useful. And maybe only your mother and I to teach you."

"Gee," Herbie nodded at Josephine. "Think of that."

She pulled at her jumper where it was very tight over newly swelling breasts and patted her blonde braided hair. "What about *my* mother and father, Mr. Plunkett? Won't they be—be—"

"Naw!" Herbie laughed the loud, country laugh he'd been practicing lately. "They're dead-enders. They won't pull through. They live in the City, don't they? They'll just be some—"

"Herbie!"

"—some foam on a mushroom-shaped cloud," he finished, utterly entranced by the image. "Gosh, I'm sorry," he said, as he looked from his angry father to the quivering girl. He went on in a studiously reasonable voice. "But it's the truth, anyway. That's why they sent you and Lester here. I guess I'll marry you—afterwards. And you ought to get in the habit of calling *him* pop. Because that's the way it'll be."

Josephine squeezed her eyes shut, kicked the shed door open, and ran out. "I hate you, Herbie Plunkett," she wept. "You're a beast!"

Herbie grimaced at his father—*women, women, women!*—and ran after her. "Hey, Jo! Listen!"

The trouble was, Plunkett thought worriedly as he carried the emergency bulbs for the hydroponic garden into the cellar—the trouble was that Herbie had learned through constant reiteration the one thing: survival came before all else, and amenities were merely amenities.

Strength and self-sufficiency—Plunkett had worked out the virtues his children needed years ago, sitting in air-conditioned offices and totting corporation balances with one eye always on the calendar.

"Still," Plunkett muttered, "still—Herbie shouldn't—" He shook his head.

He inspected the incubators near the long steaming tables of the hydroponic garden. A tray about ready to hatch. They'd have to start assembling eggs to replace it in the morning. He paused in the third room, filled a gap in the bookshelves.

"Hope Josephine steadies the boy in his schoolwork. If he fails that next exam, they'll make me send him to town regularly. Now *there's* an aspect of survival I can hit Herbie with."

He realized he'd been talking to himself, a habit he'd been combating futilely for more than a month. Stuffy talk, too. He was becoming like those people who left tracts on trolley cars.

"Have to start watching myself,"

he commented. "Dammit, again!"

The telephone clattered upstairs. He heard Ann walk across to it, that serene, unhurried walk all pregnant women seem to have.

"Elliot! Nat Medarie."

"Tell him I'm coming, Ann." He swung the vault-like door carefully shut behind him, looked at it for a moment, and started up the high stone steps.

"Hello, Nat. What's new?"

"Hi, Plunk. Just got a postcard from Fitzgerald. Remember him? The abandoned silver mine in Montana? Yeah. He says we've got to go on the basis that lithium and hydrogen bombs will be used."

Plunkett leaned against the wall with his elbow. He cradled the receiver on his right shoulder so he could light a cigarette. "Fitzgerald can be wrong sometimes."

"Uhm. I don't know. But you know what a lithium bomb means, don't you?"

"It means," Plunkett said, staring through the wall of the house and into a boiling Earth, "that a chain reaction may be set off in the atmosphere if enough of them are used. Maybe if only one—"

"Oh, can it," Medarie interrupted. "That gets us nowhere. That way nobody gets through, and we might as well start shuttling from church to bar-room like my brother-in-law in Chicago is doing right now. Fred, I used to say to him— No, listen Plunk: it means I was right. You didn't dig deep enough."

"*Deep* enough! I'm as far down as I want to go. If I don't have enough layers of lead and concrete to shield me—well, if they can crack *my* shell, then you won't be able to walk on the surface before you die of thirst, Nat. No—I sunk my dough in power supply. Once that fails, you'll find yourself putting the used air back into your empty oxygen tanks by hand!"

The other man chuckled. "All right. I *hope* I see you around."

"And I hope *I* see . . ." Plunkett twisted around to face the front window as an old station wagon bumped over the ruts in his driveway. "Say, Nat, what do you know? Charlie Whiting just drove up. Isn't this Sunday?"

"Yeah. He hit my place early, too. Some sort of political meeting in town and he wants to make it. It's not enough that the striped-pants brigade are practically glaring into each other's eyebrows this time. A couple of local philosophers are impatient with the slow pace at which their extinction is approaching, and they're getting together to see if they can't hurry it up some."

"Don't be bitter," Plunkett smiled. "Here's praying at you. Regards to Ann, Plunk."

Plunkett cradled the receiver and ambled downstairs. Outside, he watched Charlie Whiting pull the door of the station wagon open on its one desperate hinge.

"Eggs stowed, Mr. Plunkett," Charlie said. "Receipt signed. Here.

You'll get a check Wednesday."

"Thanks, Charlie. Hey, you kids get back to your books. Go on, Herbie. You're having an English quiz tonight. Eggs still going up, Charlie?"

"Up she goes." The old man slid onto the cracked leather seat and pulled the door shut deftly. He bent his arm on the open window. "Heh. And every time she does I make a little more off you survivor fellas who are too scairt to carry 'em into town yourself."

"Well, you're entitled to it," Plunkett said, uncomfortably. "What about this meeting in town?"

"Bunch of folks goin' to discuss the conference. I say we pull out. I say we walk right out of the dern thing. This country never won a conference yet. A million conferences the last few years and everyone knows what's gonna happen sooner or later. Heh. They're just wastin' time. Hit 'em first, I say."

"Maybe we will. Maybe *they* will. Or—maybe, Charlie—a couple of different nations will get what looks like a good idea at the same time."

Charlie Whiting shoved his foot down and ground the starter. "You don't make sense. If we hit 'em first how can they do the same to us? Hit 'em first—hard enough—and they'll never recover in time to hit us back. That's what *I* say. But you survivor fellas—" he shook his white head angrily as the car shot away.

"Hey!" he yelled, turning into the road. "Hey, look!"

Plunkett looked over his shoulder. Charlie Whiting was gesturing at him with his left hand, the forefinger pointing out and the thumb up straight.

"Look, Mr. Plunkett," the old man called. "Boom! Boom! Boom!" He cackled hysterically and writhed over the steering wheel.

Rusty scuttled around the side of the house, and after him, yipping frantically in ancient canine tradition.

Plunkett watched the receding car until it swept around the curve two miles away. He stared at the small dog returning proudly.

Poor Whiting. Poor everybody, for that matter, who had a normal distrust of crackpots.

How could you permit a greedy old codger like Whiting to buy your produce, just so you and your family wouldn't have to risk trips into town?

Well, it was a matter of having decided years ago that the world was too full of people who were convinced that they were faster on the draw than anyone else—and the other fellow was bluffing anyway. People who believed that two small boys could pile up snowballs across the street from each other and go home without having used them, people who discussed the merits of concrete fences as opposed to wire guard-rails while their automobile skidded over the cliff. People who were righteous. People who were apathetic.

It was the last group, Plunkett remembered, who had made him stop buttonholing his fellows, at last. You got tired of standing around in a hair shirt and pointing ominously at the heavens. You got to the point where you wished the human race well, but you wanted to pull you and yours out of the way of its tantrums. Survival for the individual and his family, you thought—

Clang-ng-ng-ng-ng!

Plunkett pressed the stud on his stopwatch. Funny. There was no practice alarm scheduled for today. All the kids were out of the house, except for Saul—and he wouldn't dare to leave his room, let alone tamper with the alarm. Unless, perhaps, Ann—

He walked inside the kitchen. Ann was running toward the door, carrying Dinah. Her face was oddly unfamiliar. "Saulie!" she screamed. "Saulie! Hurry *up,* Saulie!"

"I'm coming, momma," the boy yelled as he clattered down the stairs. "I'm coming as fast as I can! I'll make it!"

Plunkett understood. He put a heavy hand on the wall, under the dinner-plate clock.

He watched his wife struggle down the steps into the cellar. Saul ran past him and out of the door, arms flailing. "I'll make it, poppa! I'll make it!"

Plunkett felt his stomach move. He swallowed with great care. "Don't hurry, son," he whispered. "It's only judgment day."

He straightened out and looked at his watch, noticing that his hand on the wall had left its moist outline behind. One minute, twelve seconds. Not bad. Not bad at all. He'd figured on three.

Clang-ng-ng-ng-ng!

He started to shake himself and began a shudder that he couldn't control. What was the matter? He knew what he had to do. He had to unpack the portable lathe that was still in the barn. . . .

"Elliot!" his wife called.

He found himself sliding down the steps on feet that somehow wouldn't lift when he wanted them to. He stumbled through the open cellar door. Frightened faces dotted the room in an unrecognizable jumble.

"We all here?" he croaked.

"All here, poppa," Saul said from his position near the aeration machinery. "Lester and Herbie are in the far room, by the other switch. Why is Josephine crying? Lester isn't crying. I'm not crying, either."

Plunkett nodded vaguely at the slim, sobbing girl and put his hand on the lever protruding from the concrete wall. He glanced at his watch again. Two minutes, ten seconds. Not bad.

"Mr. Plunkett!" Lester Dawkins sped in from the corridor. "Mr. Plunkett! Herbie ran out of the other door to get Rusty. I told him—"

Two minutes, twenty seconds, Plunkett realized as he leaped to

the top of the steps. Herbie was running across the vegetable garden, snapping his fingers behind him to lure Rusty on. When he saw his father, his mouth stiffened with shock. He broke stride for a moment, and the dog charged joyously between his legs. Herbie fell.

Plunkett stepped forward. *Two minutes, forty seconds.* Herbie jerked himself to his feet, put his head down—and ran.

Was that dim thump a distant explosion? There — another one! Like a giant belching. Who had started it? And did it matter—now?

Three minutes. Rusty scampered down the cellar steps, his head back, his tail flickering from side to side. Herbie panted up. Plunkett grabbed him by the collar and jumped.

And as he jumped he saw—far to the south—the umbrellas opening their agony upon the land. Rows upon swirling rows of them. . . .

He tossed the boy ahead when he landed. *Three minutes, five seconds.* He threw the switch, and, without waiting for the door to close and seal, darted into the corridor. That took care of two doors; the other switch controlled the remaining entrances. He reached it. He pulled it. He looked at his watch. *Three minutes, twenty seconds.* "The bombs," blubbered Josephine. "The bombs!"

Ann was scrabbling Herbie to her in the main room, feeling his arms, caressing his hair, pulling him in for a wild hug and crying out yet again. "Herbie! Herbie! Herbie!"

"I know you're gonna lick me, pop. I—I just want you to know that I think you ought to."

"I'm not going to lick you, son."

"You're not? But gee, I deserve a licking. I deserve the worst—"

"You may," Plunkett said, gasping at the wall of clicking geigers. "*You may deserve a beating,*" he yelled, so loudly that they all whirled to face him, "but I won't punish you, not only for now, but forever! And as I with you," he screamed, "so you with yours! Understand?"

"Yes," they replied in a weeping, ragged chorus. "We understand!"

"Swear!" Swear that you and your children and your children's children will never punish another human being—*no matter what the provocation.*"

"We swear!" they bawled at him. "We swear!"

Then they all sat down.

To wait.

SUSPENSE
HIGH-TENSION FICTION

SUSPENSE STORYETTE

Maybe the lady was a Juno but she had a neurosis— and the man was mighty curious . . .

SHE DIDN'T BOUNCE

PETER PHILLIPS

Like an etched diamond, this gruesome gem of a story combines hard brilliance with soft, subtle fire. It explains why Peter Phillips—a carefully hidden writer who does his lurking somewhere in London —has been winning more and more appreciative attention from American audiences. So far, some 20-odd of his flavorful, uniquely styled miniatures have appeared in detective and science-fiction magazines on this side of the Atlantic. His best-known story, of course, is the keen-cut Manna, *perennially reprinted in anthologies.*

Peter's American agent reports that the author's 1950 output included not only the opus herewith, but a small daughter. Both opus and daughter are doing w e l l, thank you.

Not that I have anything against fat women. In fact, like the Southern Gauls, I can stand them reasonably heavy-duty Goodyear. But when they go mock coy, and try to fool you they're not really sensitive about it, what's to say?

Francie was that way, slyly begging the reassurance of: "Hell, you're just right, what's your beef?" What beef . . . ! Or, if you were a beanpole like me, "Hey I wish I had some of that to keep the cold out."

Francie started well at the ankles, they were almost thin. But she started blooming out above the knees and didn't stop. . . So she looked a little top-heavy. Just the same, though

the usual girlish features were big, their shape was standard.

I wondered when I first saw her how much was her and how much was cleverly slenderizing clothes. I got the urge to see the hull without the superstructure. But it was hard going. She never went bathing. She was specially sensitive about the top-hamper—*décolleté* was out.

Anyway, I was curious. Besides, she did have that something. Carson did a lycanthropic glissando when she first came to the office, salaciously nictitated — winked, to you — and swung his chair to improve the view.

It took time. She was afraid a man might tell her the truth. But she wanted men so she could argue herself into affirming her normality. The conflict built up a grudge neurosis against men. She worked it off by alternately playing easy and hard-to-get. She made me think of a plump vixen who could reach the grapes all right but feared to bite in case they were sour.

She wanted loving. She was healthy woman, plus, in that respect. But when it came to clearing decks she started worrying how the fellow would take her minus rigging, and she would indicate the exit. That was how I figured it.

I thought she'd look pretty good if your tastes were that way. Mine were, right then. I dreamed of a Gargamelle-Juno. I'd just scribbled off a hairpin blonde, feeling bone-bruised, and wanted someplace yielding to lay the head.

But what's the play when the cushion-presumptive pleads: "You don't think I'm getting too fat?" And when you gracefully ornament the negative, she pouts, "You do, really," and thinks you're just saying nice things to ease her into the salle d'amour?

Which, of course, you are, and she wants to go, and you do like her that way. But does she believe it? No. So she doesn't go, but does everything, short of going to make *you* want to.

Francie was certainly cruel to herself. When women have been that way since they were kids, if they can't take it off they laugh it off. But with Francie, it was pretty recent.

The other girls in the office had been ready at first to pass her by. They admired her clothes. They even kept their claws off when young Carson made a play for her.

But when in the same breath she deprecated her figure, said she didn't mind it because men liked it, then complained about their passes at her, the girls said: "Fat bitch."

All in all, she was getting badly mixed up. I saw I had to do something. To give her some self-respect. And satisfy my own curiosity.

We had a new clerk come on the shipping desk. He made a detailed warm appraisal of Francie the first day. She was looking good. A tight skirt showed the chubsome line of her long, plump thighs. It was a hot day. She had her jacket off. Her blouse wasn't a loose fit, either.

He said low: "Brother, would she bounce!"

Francie caught it. She asked me later, cherubic, wide-eyed: "He meant I was fat?"

I was annoyed. "He was paying you a compliment. Don't kid me you're that dumb," and I said still more by means of a friendly leer.

I ducked as she tried to erase it from my face, and caught her hand. She looked even better with the flush on her cheeks, her corn-hair thick and loose. I said: "Please have dinner with me again tonight, Francie."

We had an excellent meal, chased with various potables. Afterwards she said: "I've got a bottle of Scotch at my place. I'd hate to drink it alone."

At her apartment she coaxed soft swing from the radio, poured drinks.

I kissed her and she went off. When she came back, she just stood in the doorway.

She had on a thin negligee and nothing except her underneath it. I kept looking. Her big face was quite pale. She'd washed off all her make-up. She was a big woman, but all woman. I could smell bath salts.

Maybe I was a little nervous. A plump lamb. But it was the butcher who was nervous.

I said: "Hey, Francie. . . .you're beautiful." I got up and went over.

She said quietly: "You're a liar."

It was no time for argument. When I'd kissed her, she spoke, still quiet, but in a statement, not an intimate whisper: "I don't suppose you could carry me."

I'm not saying it was easy, but that whiskey was strengthening stuff.

That's how I'll remember Francie, as I saw her then. She was soft, perhaps, but not flabby, and she had a beautiful skin.

She said, in time, unsmiling: "So I bounce?"

I grunted, nestling.

She said: "So you don't really think I'm too fat?" I was irritated.

I said: "Hell, no, you're just right."

She wouldn't relax. Her wide brown eyes seemed to be searching for something beyond the blank ceiling as she lay there, quiescent but tense. She looked—lonely. She said: "You're just saying that. What do you really think?"

It was almost funny. Surely she knew that. "I've told you," I said.

She said: "I don't think you mean it."

I laughed, put my arm round her shoulders. "Have it your way," I said. "I'm a liar. You are fat, and I just wanted to see you this way because I was curious."

She scrambled up quickly.

"For God's sake. . ." I said, scared.

"I knew it."

"Don't be crazy. Can't you take a crack?"

"I knew it," she said. "You meant it," she said; and then the whole white womanly bulk of her was at the window, heavy curves silhouetted against the sky.

I dashed for her, but she jumped.

SCIENCE HUMOR

JEANNIE with the light brown cure

ALEXANDER SAMALMAN

As a trust-buster, Doc Tempo was a fine flop, until he put his trust in Jeannie— and applied a light-brown hair to the dog that bit him.

TOM SMATHERS was in a critical condition.

"Dr. Tempo," he spoke faintly, "the last treatment you gave me didn't seem to work. I thought the Ninth would do me some good, but the choral was too exciting. Dr. Tempo, I feel that I need the Fifth."

"The Pastoral is what you need," I said gently. "The Fifth is too stimulating—it might affect you the same way as the Ninth. I've ordered the Pastoral and it is due any day now."

"Are you sure?" my patient asked entreatingly. "I thought that . . ." His voice fell off to a mere murmur.

Sad case, Smathers. A victim of the space-ship building industry. His work took him to high altitudes, and one day he returned to earth and was careless about adjusting the atmospheric balancer. He fell into the hands of a quack who mistakenly believed that swing would help him.

After a month of the famous Benny Goodman treatment, effective in many cases, particularly as an aid to digestion, but useless as far as Smath-

ers was concerned, he came to me a battered, broken man. I immediately prescribed large doses of Beethoven, and for a time the treatment had good results. But now I began to doubt my own judgment.

After all, musical therapy was still in experimental stages, although its potentialities had been glimpsed as early as the Twentieth Century. Later, Dr. Rithem had won the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the curative powers of harmo-melodic vibrations when administered through the proper instrument, his own invention—a vast improvement on both radio and phonograph. This invention, the Dynamic Sound Ray Case, gave music new vibrational qualities that brought out its full medicinal value.

The ingenious instrument was happily a moderately priced item to produce. But the special recordings were beyond the reach of the average individual, and acute shortages existed in the hospitals. Just let the Earth get involved in a war with Mars or Jupiter, and there'd be funds for every need, but when it came to appropriations for healing . . .

Worst of all, Dr. Rithem had been a great scientist, but a poor business man. Hence, both the Dynamic Sound Ray Case and all save the early recordings were tied up in the control of the Medical Music Trust. This monopoly gave me many uneasy moments.

As I passed among my patients, again and again I was asked for this or that harmo-melodic treatment which was out of the question. For instance, I simply was unable to obtain the world-renowned Mahler treatment for nervous disorders. The budget wouldn't stand it. In vain I argued with the Board of Trustees, but was invariably told to stick to Bruckner in such cases.

I approached my favorite patient, a mere chit of a girl, little eight-year-old Eleanor Day. She smiled up at me bravely.

"The Bartered Bride?" she asked almost brightly.

. . . about the author

A *protégé* of the illustrious Frank Harris, Samalman can turn out sly, biting satire quite worthy of his master—as this story demonstrates. Once renowned chiefly for his sophisticated love stories appearing in such magazines as *Smart Set,* in latter years he has been turning out equally sophisticated science-fantasy stories—most of which, in one way or another, have crept into the anthologies.

No one knows why science and fantasy writers, with a few precious exceptions, take matters so seriously. In the episode which follows the deft author again proves that just as music can cure, fantasy can tickle. . . .

"It will be here almost any day," I promised as cheerfully as I could, wondering when the devil it would come. "Just be patient a little while longer, and we'll make a well little girl of you."

Just as I was beginning to make real progress in my work, when it seemed that the worst problems were solved and all would be clear sailing, a calamity occurred. It is difficult to convey how devastating, how disruptive was the trouble caused by the Medical Music Trust.

In retrospect, I am willing to admit that there may have been some justice to their demands. But at the time it all happened I was madly incensed.

The contract which the hospitals had made with the Medical Music Trust having expired, the Trust demanded such a general increase in rates that all worth-while therapeutic music became prohibitive in price. To top it all, the Government put an additional tax on the Dynamic Sound Ray Case. We were in a bad way, and so were our patients.

There was dickering back and forth for a matter of months, the Government sluggish to intercede. Finally, having reached no agreement, the Medical Music Trust withdrew all of the music it controlled from the use of any of our hospitals.

To understand the extent of the tragedy you must know that the Trust owned the therapeutic rights to all of the specially recorded musical treatments produced after Dr. Rithem sold out to the syndicate. That left only the early recordings made by the worthy doctor. Precious few, mostly the work of an early American called Stephen Foster.

On the strength of this the Government refused to intercede in the dispute, holding that enough music was available for all practical purposes! Little did they know! Had there been a doctor in the House of Representatives we would have been saved!

Imagine curing dropsy without Brahms! Imagine treating paralysis without Mozart! Unthinkable.

I admit that Stephen Foster was an estimable composer in his own right. As a matter of fact, I had frequently found his melodies helpful in cases of pneumonia, but I had seldom prescribed them for anything else, and had indeed found some patients allergic to them. Stephen Foster for rheumatism—bah! I could have done better with Irving Berlin.

I was particularly sorry for Smathers. Foster made him weep, and that was just what would hurt him. It seemed the hospital might have to go back to old homeopathic methods.

The day the tragedy broke I stopped sadly beside the bedside of Smathers.

"I suppose you've heard," I said—for rumors spread swiftly via hospital grapevine. "I guess you know you may have to wait some time for that Pastoral."

Smathers smiled up at me, trying to make the best of it.

"I'm glad you're not discouraged," I went on. "Perhaps it isn't as bad as it looks now. I've an appointment this afternoon with Dr. Barr, president of the Music Trust. I'll try to talk some sense into him."

At that, my patient's face brightened, and he laughed aloud. He crooked his finger and I bent low, and he whispered something in my ear. My pulse pounded when I heard what he had to say. Good old Smathers! He'd been around hospitals so long, and so many incorrect treatments had been used in his case, that he had picked up some medical knowledge. I decided to try the experiment he proposed. It might work—it *had* to work!

That afternoon Dr. Barr came to see me. He was a pompous individual with fat jowls and a rippling cascade of chins which made a wisp of mustache lost on a great expanse of face. His clothes bespoke prosperity, his bulging abdomen bespoke self-indulgence, and his heavy brows were designed to make one quail. However, I pulled myself together, determined to be polite and politic at all costs. I grinned inwardly at Smathers' brilliant suggestion that might work a miracle.

"Good day, Dr. Barr," I said formally. "The Futura Hospital is honored by your presence."

He merely grunted in acknowledgment.

"I hope," I continued, "that we may come to an understanding."

Another grunt.

"I'm glad you understand," I added. "You know, of course, how important it is for us to have the music we require. It's really a matter of life and death."

"I understand nothing," he fairly snarled, "except that you can't meet our rates. Very well, then. Use the music you have available and cease asking for our recordings!"

"But you are a doctor," I pleaded. "You know how vital it is for us to have *all* music at our disposal. There are patients who will respond to the third movement of a symphony while the fourth, of the same symphony, might prove fatal. You can't play with people's lives that way."

"Then meet our rental rates."

There was no use. He was adamant.

It was time to use Smathers' idea. I pressed the buzzer.

My assistants were all ready to cooperate instantly. The patients had all been forewarned and fortified for the ordeal they would have to face. I couldn't offer earphones to Dr. Barr—that would have been too obvious—so they all had to suffer.

Echoing through the halls of the hospital, penetrating clearly into my private office, came the words and music of that really sweet song:

I dream of Jeannie with the light
brown hair,
Borne like a vapor on the
Summer air. . . .

Increasing in volume as it pro-

gressed, the song went on to the end. Dr. Barr was unmoved.

"I see you are already using substitutes," he said calmly.

He made as if to go, but I pressed another buzzer, and an orderly promptly entered with tea and cake.

"I hope," I said in an exaggeration of formal politeness, "that you will accept our humble hospitality."

"Why . . . yes, of course," responded the surprised Trust head.

I knew Dr. Barr couldn't resist refreshments. That was part of Smathers' ingenious plan. The human hog before me began gulping tea and cake at a furious rate. I kept silent, presently ringing the first buzzer again. Once more:

I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair. . . .

Dr. Barr paid hardly any attention. A man of iron. I began to have fears about this experiment.

I talked rapidly now, using every persuasive device to hold him. I rang for another orderly who brought more refreshments, and after the proper interval I rang again, and once more:

I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair. . . .

This time, I noted, his fingers began to twitch.

"Is that the only record you have?" he rasped impatiently.

I was exultant.

"Well," I hedged, "it's one of the very few early Rithem recordings we're still able to use, and it does my patient Smathers so much good!"

I smiled in a manner most beneficent. Dr. Barr found the power to smile in return, but I noticed that his fingers were still twitching, and now he was performing weird gyrations with his forehead, nose and thick lips. Now was the time to strike. I pressed the buzzer again.

I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair. . . .

Louder than before the music reverberated, this time without pause.

A piece of cake half-raised to his mouth, Dr. Barr sat as if spellbound. His face turned crimson, then white.

At the fifth repetition of the song, the accumulated dosage had its expected effect. Dr. Barr collapsed on the floor of my office.

My orderlies carried him to a private room in the hospital.

Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair, and obesity just didn't get on together, as Smathers and I had known.

After checking up on the condition of my more serious patients, I retreated to my own chamber and there in solitude softly whistled to myself the Poet and Peasant Overture to quiet my own upset nerves.

Dr. Barr was extremely grateful for the excellent care he received at the hospital. All the doctors, nurses and orderlies were instructed to handle him with kid gloves.

Then one day I examined him very solemnly, made my diagnosis, and prescribed a musical course of treatment for him: Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair.

"Are you certain?" he whispered.

I noted with satisfaction that he paled at the very thought. I felt some qualms of conscience, but I was determined to carry on.

Over and over the Foster melody was played, again and again Dr. Barr had fainting spells and other manifestations of weakness, but I had instilled such great confidence that he did not complain.

The breaking point came finally, however, as I knew it must. One morning I entered the hospital to find Dr. Barr almost a maniac!

"Give me Beethoven!" he cried, frothing at the mouth. "Give me Brahms! Give me Mozart!"

"But, Dr. Barr," I expostulated, "you and your Trust have made those treatments impossible."

"I don't care!" he shouted. "I don't care! I want the Moonlight Sonata! I must have the Moonlight—"

"There is a way," I said smoothly, "by which you can have all the musical medication you need." And I drew forth a document I had prepared in advance.

It granted my own hospital, and all other hospitals, the right to use all Rithem therapeutic recordings at the old rate for another ten years.

Dr. Barr grasped the document and read it. There were tears of joy in his eyes when he signed, a defeated man.

Immediately I telephoned the nearest source of supply and in a shorter time than it takes to tell, an aero-car arrived with a huge quantity of long-wanted recordings.

There then echoed through the halls of Futura the beautiful and inspiring strains of the Moonlight Sonata. As the lovely, fragile music, so helpful in almost any disease I can name, wafted through the air, my patients were electrified with new life and joy.

Dr. Barr sat up on his haunches, completely cured. He made a grab for the contract, but I was too fast for him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw dear little Eleanor Day. Her face was as if transfigured. The greatest crisis the medical profession had faced in a century was over.

Now, when the Dynamic Sound Ray Box has outgrown its infancy, and so many excellent treatments are freely available, I must append a word anent that hero, Tom Smathers, whose sacrifice is written in shining letters. His glorious heroism saved many lives—but the poor fellow never lived to know it.

Alas, the constant repetition of Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair that day Dr. Barr called upon me had proved too much for his condition. Though we tried our utmost to brighten him up when help arrived, we could not undo the damage. He suffered a fatal relapse and died, a martyr to medical science.

SPOOK TALE

All's fair in love and war—except maybe if the competition is only there in the spirit. Gus was ready to try anything—and did—until he found out it wasn't the ghost he had to change, but the ghost's mind . . .

GHOST OF A CHANCE

THEODORE STURGEON

SHE SAID, "There's something following me!" in a throttled voice, and started to run.

It sort of got me. Maybe because she was so tiny and her hair was so white. Maybe because, white hair and all, she looked so young and helpless. But mostly, I think, because of what she said. "There's something following me." Not "someone." "Something." So I just naturally hauled out after her.

I caught her at the corner, put my hand on her shoulder. She gasped, and shot away from me. "Take it easy, lady," I panted. "I won't let it get you."

She stopped so suddenly that I almost ran her down. We stood looking at each other. She had great big dark eyes that didn't go with her hair at all. I said, "What makes you go dashing around at three o'clock of a winter's morning?"

"What makes you ask?" Her voice was smooth, musical.

"Now, look—you started this conversation."

She started to speak, and then something over my shoulder caught her eye. She froze for a second: and I was so fascinated by the play of expression on her face that I didn't follow her gaze. Abruptly she brought her eyes back to my face and then slapped it. It was a stinger. I stepped back and swore, and by the time I was finished she was half-way up the block. I stood there rubbing my cheek and let her go.

I met Henry Gade a couple of days later and told him about it. Henry is a practical psychologist. Perhaps I should say his field is practical psychology, because Henry ain't practical. He has theories. He has more damn theories than any man alive. He is thirty and bald and he makes lots of money without doing any work.

"I think she was crazy," I said.

"Ah," said Henry, and laid a finger beside his nose. I think the nose was longer. "But did you ask her what *she* thought?"

"No. I only asked her what she was doing running around that time of night."

"The trouble with you, Gus, is that you have no romance in you. What you should have done was to catch her up in your arms and smother her with kisses."

"She'd have sla—"

"She did, anyway, didn't she?" said Henry, and walked off.

Henry kids a lot. But he sometimes says crazy things like that when he isn't kidding a bit.

I met the girl again three months later, when it was spring. I was in the Duke's beer garden looking at his famous sunflower. The sunflower was twelve feet tall and had crutches to keep it standing up. It grew beside the dirt alley that was the main road of the beer garden. There were ratty-looking flowerbeds all over the place and tables set among them. And Japanese lanterns that had been out in the rain, and a laryngitic colored band. The place was crowded, and I was standing there letting all that noise beat me back and forth, looking at the sunflower. The Duke swore he could fill a No. 6 paper bag with the seeds from that one flower.

And then she said, "Hello. I'm sorry I had to slap your face." She was squinched up against the stem of the sunflower, in amongst all those shadows and leaves.

I said, "Well, if it isn't my pretty little pug. What do you mean, you're sorry you *had* to? You should be just sorry you did."

"Oh, I had to. I wouldn't slap you just for nothing."

"Oh—I did something? I shoulda got slapped?"

"Please," she said. "I am sorry."

I looked at her. She was. "What are you doing in there—hiding?"

. . . about the author

Ted Sturgeon was obviously born to be a writer. Thus, he trained for six years to become a circus aerialist, spent three years at sea, operated a bulldozer in Puerto Rico and a hotel in the West Indies. He also spent periods as a glass worker, a truck driver, a salesman and an advertising copy chief, winding up finally as a promotion writer for *Fortune*. But he never let any of these amusements interfere with his real work, which was the turning out of more than two million words of science-fiction, fantasy and scripts radio and video.

She nodded.

"Who are you hiding from?"

She wouldn't say. She just shrugged and said she was just—you know—hiding.

"Is it the same thing you were running away from that night?"

"Yes."

I told her she was being silly. "I looked all around after you left and there wasn't a thing on the street."

"Oh, yes there was!"

"Not that I could see."

"I know that."

I suddenly got the idea that this was a very foolish conversation. "Come out of there and have a beer with me. We'll talk this thing over."

"Oh, I couldn't do that!"

"Sure you could. Easy. Look." I reached in and grabbed her.

"You should know better than that," she said, and then something happened to break the stem of the big sunflower. It tottered and came crashing down like a redwood. The huge flower landed on the tray that Giuseppe, the waiter, was carrying. It held eight long beers, two pitchers and a Martini. The beers and a lot of broken glass flew in every direction but up. The Martini went back over his head and crashed on the bars of the cage where the Duke kept his trained squirrel. There was some confusion. The girl with the white hair was gone. All the time that the Duke was telling me what a menace I was, I kept staring over his heaving shoulder at the squirrel, which was lapping up the Martini that had splashed inside the cage. After the Duke ran out of four-letter words he had me thrown out. We'd been pretty good friends before that, too.

I got hold of Henry as soon as I could. "I saw that girl again," I told him, "and I grabbed her like you said." I told him what had happened. He laughed at me. Henry always laughs at me.

"Don't look so solemn about it, Gus!" he said, and slapped me on the back. "A little excitement is good for the blood. Laugh it off. The Duke didn't sue you, did he?"

"No," I said, "not exactly. But that squirrel of his ate the cherry out of that cocktail that fell into his cage and got awful sick. And the Duke went and had the doctor send his bill to me. Stomach pump."

Henry had been eating salted nuts, and when I said that he snorted half a mouthful of chewed nuts up into his nose. I've done that and it hurts. In a way I was glad to see Henry suffer.

"I need some help," I told him after he got his health back. "Maybe that girl's crazy, but I think she's in trouble."

"She most certainly is," said Henry. "But I don't see what you could do about it."

"Oh, I'd figure out something."

"I also don't see why you want to help her out."

"That's a funny thing," I said slowly. "You know me, Henry—I got no use for wimmen unless they leave me alone. Every time one of

'em does something nice, it's because she's figgerin' to pull something lousy a little later."

Henry swallowed some cashews carefully and then laughed. "You've summed up at least seven volumes of male objectivism," he said. "But what has that got to do with your silver-haired Nemesis?"

"Nemesis? I thought maybe she was Polish. Her? Well, she's never done anything to me that wasn't lousy. So I figure maybe she's different. I figure maybe she's going to work it the other way around and pull something nice. And I want to be around when that happens."

"Your logic is labored but dependable." He said something else, about what's the use of being intelligent and educated when all wisdom rests on the lips of a child of nature, but I didn't catch on. "Well, I'm rather interested in whether or not you can do anything for her. Go ahead and stick your neck out."

"I don't know where she lives or nothing."

"Oh—that." He pulled out a little notebook and a silver pencil and wrote down something. "Here," he said, tearing it off and handing it to me. It said, "Iola Harvester, 2336 Dungannon Street."

"Who's this?"

"Your damsel in distress. Your dark-eyed slapper of faces."

"How the devil do you know her name?"

"She was a patient of mine for quite a while."

"She was? Why you son-of-a-gun! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't you ask me?"

I started for the door, reading over the name and address. "You know what, Henry?"

"What?"

"Iola's a pretty name."

Henry laughed. "Let me know how you make out."

I went up and rang the bell. It was a big apartment house; Iola lived on the fourth floor. The foyer door belched at me and I pushed it open and went in. They had one of those self-service elevators so I went up the stairs. Those things make me nervous.

She was waiting up on her floor to find out who had rung the bell. She was wearing a black housecoat that touched the floor all the way around and was close around her throat. It had a stiff collar that stuck up and out and seemed to sort of cradle her head. There was a zipper all down the front and two silver initials on the left breast. I couldn't get my wind right away and it wasn't the stairs.

"Oh!" she said. "It's you!"

"Yup." I looked at her for a minute. "Gee! I didn't know you were so *tiny!"* There was something about her that made me want to laugh out loud, but not because I saw anything funny. When I said that she got pink.

"I . . . don't know whether I should ask you in," she said. "I don't even know your name."

"My name is Gus. So now you can ask me in."

"You're the only man I have ever met who can be fresh without being fresh," she said, and stood aside. I didn't know what she meant, but I went in, anyway. It was a nice place. Everything in it was delicate and small, like Iola. I stood in the middle of the floor spinning my hat on one finger until she took it away from me. "Sit down," she said. I did and she did, with the room between us. "What brings you here; how did you find out my address, and will you have some coffee or a drink?"

"I came because I think you're in a jam and you might need help. A friend of mine gave me your name and address. I don't want any coffee and what have you got to drink?"

"Sauterne," she said. "Rum, rye and Scotch."

"I never *touch* that stuff."

"What do you drink?"

"Gin." She looked startled. "Or milk. Got any milk?"

She had. She got me a great big glass of it. She even had some herself. She said, "Now, what's on your mind?"

"I told you, Miss Iola. I want to help you."

"There's nothing you can do."

"Oh, yes there is. There must be. If you'll tell me what's botherin' you, making you hide away in . . . in sunflowers and runnin' away from nothing. I'll bet I could fix you up—What are you laughing at?"

"You're so earnest!" she said.

"Everybody's all the time laughing at me," I said sadly. "Well, how about it?"

The smile faded away from her face and she sat for a long time saying nothing. I went and sat beside her and looked at her. I didn't try to touch her at all. Suddenly she nodded and began to talk.

"I might as well tell you. It's tough to keep it to myself. Most people would laugh at me; the one doctor I went to eventually gave me up as a bad job. He said I was kidding myself. He said that what had happened just couldn't happen—I imagined it all. But you—I think I can trust you. I don't know why—

"It started about two years ago. I had a slight crush on a fellow at a summer camp. He took me to a dance one night—one of those country square dances. It was a lot of fun and we danced ourselves tired. Then we went out onto the lakeshore and he—well, the moon and all, you know—he put his arms around me. And just then a voice spoke to me. It said, 'If you know what's good for you, you'll keep away from this fellow.' I started back and asked the boy if he had said something. He hadn't. I was scared and ran all the way home. He tried to catch me, but he couldn't. I saw him the next day and tried to apologize, but there wasn't very much I could say. I tried to be nice to him, but as time went on he got more and more irritable. And he lost weight. He wound up in the hospital. Almost—died. You see, he couldn't sleep. He was afraid to sleep. He had the most terrible

dreams. I heard about one of them. It was awful.

"I didn't realize then that my seeing him had anything to do with his getting sick; but as soon as they had him in the hospital he began to get better, fast, as long as I didn't visit him. Then he would have a relapse. I heard that after he left the camp for good and went back to his home in Chicago, he was quite all right.

"Well, nothing happened for quite a while, and then I began to notice that a counterman at a sandwich bar where I ate every day had begun to act strangely. I saw him every day, but there was absolutely nothing between us. One afternoon while I was eating, he began dropping things. It was nothing at first, but it got very bad. It got so that he couldn't lift so much as a spoon without dropping it. He spilled cup after cup of coffee. He would try to make a sandwich and he'd drop the makings all over the floor and his work table. He couldn't set a place at the counter, he couldn't wait on anybody—*as long as I was there!* At first he kidded about it and called me his jinx girl. But after a week or so of that, he came over to me just as I sat down and said:

" 'Miss Harvester, I hope you don't mind what I'm going to say. but something's got to be done. I'll lose my job if I don't stop dropping things. But I never do that unless you're here! I don't know why it is, but there you have it. Would you be angry if I asked you not to eat here for a while? I was astonished, but he was so worried and so polite about it that I never ate there again. And from what I've heard my friends say, he never dropped anything again.

"And from then on it got worse and worse. A traffic cop, a nice old man, that I used to nod to each morning on my way to work, began to *itch!* I could see it, every time I passed him! I'd nod, and he'd nod, and then start to scratch as if he itched so badly he just couldn't help himself. And an office boy who spent a lot of time near my desk began to miss doors! I mean, he just couldn't get through a door without running into the jamb. The poor boy almost went crazy. He'd walk slowly toward a door, aim carefully, and try to go through, but he couldn't do it unless he struck the jamb first. I got so heartsick watching him that I quit my job and got another—which took care of the nice policeman, too. Neither of them were ever troubled again.

"But that's the way it's been ever since. Any man I see regularly starts suffering dreadfully from some strange trouble. It's bad enough for the ones who just see me in a routine way. But oh, the poor men who try to take me out to shows and things! When I go out, that strange voice speaks to me again, and tells me to keep away from the man. And if I don't, he gets terribly sick, or he gets blind spells when he crosses

any streets, or he does things that cause him to lose his job or his business. Do you see what I'm up against?"

"Don't cry, Miss Iola. Please don't cry."

"I'm n-not crying, Mr. Gus!"

"Just plain Gus!"

"Well then, you call me just plain Iola. Or Miss Harvester. Not Miss Iola."

"I'd have to feel a certain way about you to call you Iola," I said slowly. "And I'd have to feel a certain other way about you to call you Miss Harvester. I'm goin' to call you Miss Iola."

"Oh, Gus," she said, "you're so *cute!*" She smiled and sipped some milk and then went on with her story.

"I work now for a woman who owns a cosmetic business," she said. "I have a woman boss and a woman manager and office force and mostly women customers. And I hate them! I hate all women!"

"Me, too," I said.

She gave me an odd glance, and went on. "Once in a while I'm free of this thing. I can't tell you exactly how I know, but I do. It's a sort of lightening of pressure. And then I'll be walking along the street and I can feel it trying to catch up with me—just as if it had hunted me out and was following me. Sometimes I can hide and get away from it. Generally I can't."

"Oh—that's why you were running away that night I first saw you! But—why did you slap my face?"

"Because I liked you."

"That's a funny sort of way to show it, Miss Iola."

"Oh, no! The thing, whatever it is, had just caught up with me. It knew I liked you. It would have done some terrible thing to you if I hadn't slapped you to make it think I disliked you. And after I had done it I was so ashamed I ran away."

"Why did you break the stem of the sunflower?"

"Gus, I didn't! The thing did that, to get you in trouble."

"He succeeded."

"Oh, Gus—I'm so sorry."

"What for? Not your fault."

"Not— Gus, you believe me, don't you?"

"Why, sure!" I said, surprised. "Why not?"

She kissed me. Just a little one, on the cheek, but it made my heart pop up into the back of my neck and slug me.

"Well," I said as soon as I could make my breathing operate my voice, "whatever this thing is, I'll help you lick it. Ah—what is it, by the way? Got any ideas?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I certainly have. When I told the doctor this, it convinced him that I was suffering from an overdose of old-wives' tales. Doesn't it seem funny to you that after all I've told you about what happens to a man if I so much as talk to him, nothing is happening to you?"

"Come to think of it, it is funny."

"Look, then," she said, pointing. "There, and there, and there!"

I looked. Over the tops of the three doors that opened into the room, and over the two big windows, were strands of—garlic.

"I . . . heard of that," I said. "A ghost, huh?"

"A ghost," said Iola. "A jealous ghost. A dirty, rotten dog-in-the-manger ghost! Why doesn't he leave me alone?"

"I'll tear'm apart," I growled.

She smiled, the saddest, puckered-up little smile I ever did see. "No, Gus, no. You're strong, all right, but that kind of strength won't do me much good with my haunt."

"I'll find some way, Miss Iola," I said. "I will, so help me!"

"You'll try," she said softly. "So help *me!*"

She got my hat and opened the door for me, then closed it with a bang, whirled and stood with her back to it. "Gus!" She was pale, anyway, but now she looked bloodless. "Gus. He's out there! The ghost—he knows you're in here, and he's waiting for you!"

I looked at my hands. "Move on out of the way, then, Miss Iola," I said quietly, "and let me at him."

"No, Gus—no!"

"Now, looky here. It's getting late—too late for you to have my kind in your digs. I'll run along." I walked over to her, took her by the shoulders, and lifted her out of the way. Her forehead was near, so I kissed it before I put her down. "Good night," I said. She didn't answer. She was crying, so I guess she couldn't. Awful scared. I was glad about that because I knew it wasn't herself she was scared for.

I woke up the next morning and thought I was still asleep, and in the middle of a foul dream. I was cold—stone-cold, wet-cold. I felt as slimy as an eel in a barrel of oil. I opened my eyes and tried to shake the feeling off. It wouldn't shake. My last night's dinner rolled inside me as I realized that the sliminess was there, all right—my two sheets were coated with it. I could feel the wet, thick mass of it all over me. I could strip it off one arm with the other hand, and throw it—*sclup*—onto the floor.

But I couldn't see it.

I ran, gasping and retching, into the bathroom. My feet seemed to slip on the stuff, and I had trouble turning the doorknob with my slimy fingers. I climbed under the hottest shower I had ever taken, soaped, rinsed, soaped again, rinsed again. And I got out of the tub feeling cold and clammy and slimy as ever.

I tried to put some clothes on, but I couldn't stand the pressure of them; they seemed to drive the thick mass of it into my pores. I threw them off, leaped into bed, and pulled the covers over me, and with a yelp I leaped out again. It was bad enough to have it, but I couldn't bear to wallow in it. The phone rang. Iola.

"Gus, I'm terribly worried about you. Has he . . . it . . . done any-

thing to you?"

I hesitated. It wouldn't do any good to lie. "Yeah, he's been skylarking around."

"Gus, what has he done?"

"Nothin' worth talking about."

"Oh, you won't tell me. It must be something really terrible!"

"Why so?"

"Because I . . . I . . . well, I—Gus, aren't you going to say it first? Why is it that he would treat you worse than any other man?"

I slowly began to get what she was driving at. "Miss Iola—you don't lo . . . care for me or something?"

"Darling!"

I said, "Holy smoke!"

I did some thinking after I hung up. I couldn't let this thing get me down—not now, not after my hearing news like that. I clamped my jaw and got out some clean underwear and socks. I was remembering something my pop told me after my first street fight. "If you git hurt, me bye, doan't let th' other feller know it. If he thinks he can't hurt ye, ye've got 'im licked."

So I dressed. With my clothes I clasped the chill ooze to me, and when I walked out the door the slime dripped from the creases of my flesh as I moved. I stepped out onto the street with some misgivings, but it was invisible, thank the Powers.

And when I woke the next day the sliminess was gone.

I went to Henry Gade's place and borrowed a pen and paper. I had told him what I'd heard from Iola about her trouble, but nothing else.

"Who are you writing to?" he asked over his pipe, watching me scratching laboriously away at the letter.

"I'm doin' what anyone should do when he's in trouble—consulting an expert," I said, and kept on writing.

" 'Miss Beatrice Dix, *The Daily Mail,*' " he read aloud, and roared with laughter. "So you've got trouble along those lines, too, have you? Ha? Beatrice Dix—Advice to the Lovelorn!"

"You tell your little mouth to stop makin' those noises or it'll get poked," I growled. He went on reading what I had written:

"Dear Miss Dix:

"I got a problem about a girl I am very serious with. This girl has a fellow who likes her, but she don't like him none at all. He keeps on bothering her and ordering her to keep away from other men, but he never comes to see her or gives her anything or takes her out and on top of that he keeps on doing things to any other man that is interested in her and especially to me because—"

"Good heavens, Gus, couldn't you put a full stop in there somewhere?"

—"because I am at present her big moment. The things he does are not the kind of things you can get the law on him for. What I want to know is what right has this fellow to be so jealous when the girl has no use for him and what can we do to get rid of him."

"Either you're an extremely exacting student of literary styling," said Henry, "or you actually are the kind of person who writes in to Beatrice Dix's column. I've always wondered what one of those nitwits looked like," he added thoughtfully, standing off and regarding me as if I were a museum piece. "Tell me—who's the cutter-inner in your little romance?"

"A ghost."

"A ghost? Iola's jealous ghost? Gus, Gus, you improve by the hour. And do you really think you can exorcise him with the aid of a heart-throb column?"

"He don't need no exercise."

"Get out of here, Gus, you're killing me."

"I will, before I do," I said.

The following day Iola's haunt created something new and different for me. But I couldn't brave this one out. I stayed home all day after phoning the boss that I was very, very ill. Exactly what was done I can't print in a family magazine.

The answer to my letter came far sooner than I had hoped. I hadn't asked for a personal reply, and so it was printed, with my letter, thus:

"G. S.:

"You are up against a very difficult problem, if we understand the situation correctly. We have run up against such cases before. The young man who is persecuting the two of you will continue to do so just as long as he finds the girl attractive to his peculiar type of mind. And what can you do about it?

"You can ignore him completely.

"Or you can, together or singly, get the man to talk the whole thing out with you.

"Or you might try to find someone else who would interest him.

"But you must be patient. Please, for your own sakes, do not do anything rash."

I read it over half a dozen times. I figured this Dix woman was a real expert at this racket, and she ought to know what to do. But how about it? "Ignore him completely." How can you be married to a woman when you know you're liable to turn slimy at a moment's notice? "Appeal to his better nature—talk it out with him." Catch him first. "Find someone else who would interest him." Catch a lady ghost, huh? And persuade her to vamp him.

I took the paper over to Henry Gade. He's better at thinking things out than I am.

He waved the paper aside as I came in. "I've seen it," he said. "I was looking for it."

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a lovely piece of say-nothing, except that she hit the nail on the head when she said that the guy will keep right on bothering you lovebirds just as long as he finds the girl attractive. I can't get over it!" he exploded, and put his head on one side, watching me. "Good old misogynous Gus, in love after all these years!"

"Maybe it hits harder for that," I

said, and he stopped his ape-grinning and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I guess it does. You do reach in and get the truth at times, old man."

The letter from Iola was waiting for me when I got back home.

"Dearest Gus,

"This is a rotten thing for me to do, but I've got to do it. I have a suspicion of what you've been going through so bravely; *he* talked to me last night and told me some of the things he's done to you.

"So you mustn't write, Gus darling, and you mustn't phone, and above all you must never, never see me again. It's the only way out for both of us, and if it's a painful and a cruel way, then that's the breaks.

"But, beloved—*don't* try to get in touch with me. I have bought a little revolver, and if you do that I'll kill myself. That's not idle talk, Gus. I'm not afraid to do it. I've lived through enough pain.

"Sweet, sweet sweetheart, how my heart bleeds for you!"

I read it over once and tried to read it again because, somehow, I couldn't see so well. Then I dove for the phone, and thought about the revolver, and turned my back on it. Oh, she'd do it—I knew her.

Then I went out.

Henry found me. Maybe it was three weeks later, maybe four. I didn't know because I didn't give a damn. I was sitting on a bench with a couple of other gentlemen.

"Go away. You're Henry. I remember you. Go away, Henry."

"Gus! Get up out of that! You're drunk! Come home with me, Gus."

One of the other gentlemen backslid to the extent of taking some of Henry's money for helping Henry get me home. Once there, I slept the clock around.

Henry woke me, sponging my face with warm water. "Lost thirty pounds or more," he was muttering. "Filthy rags—ten-day beard—"

"You know what happened to me," I said, as if that excused and explained everything.

"Yes, I know what happened to you," he roared. "You lost your cotton-headed filly. And did you stand up and take it? No! You lay down and let yourself get kicked like the jelly-bellied no-good you are!"

"But she wouldn't—"

"I know, I know. She refused to see you any more. That's got nothing to do with it. You're wound up with her—finished. And you tried to run away. You tried to escape into filth and rotgut liquor. Don't you realize that you do nothing that way but burn up what's clean in you and leave all that's rotten, with the original wound festering in the middle of it?"

I turned my face to the wall, but I couldn't stop his voice. "Get up and bathe and shave and eat a decent meal! Try to act like a human being until you can give as good an imitation as you used to."

"No," I said thickly.

Suddenly he was on his knees by

the bed, an arm across my shoulders. "Stop your blubbering," he said gently. "Gus—you're a grown man now." He sat back on his haunches, frowning and breathing too deeply. Suddenly he rolled me over on my back, began slapping my face with his right hand, back and front, back and front, over and over and over.

And then something snapped inside me and I reared up off the bed and sent a whistling roundhouse at him. He ducked under it and jarred me with a left to the temple. And then we went to work. I was big and emaciated, and he was little and inspired. It was quite a show. It ended with him stretched out on the carpet.

"Thanks, Gus," he grinned weakly.

"Why'd you get me so riled up? Why'd you make me hit you?"

"Applied psychology," he said, getting up groggily. I helped him.

I felt my swollen nose. "I thought psychology was brain stuff!"

"Listen, pal. You and I are going to straighten old Gus out for good. You've got something deep inside that hurts—right? What did you see in that white-headed babe, anyway?"

"She's . . . she's . . . I just can't get along without her."

"You got slushy. I think your taste is lousy." Henry's eyes were narrowed and he teetered on the balls of his feet. He knew when he was treading on thin ice, but he was going to go through with this. "What do you see in an anaemic-looking wench like that? Give me nice, firm, rosy girls with some blood in their veins. *Heh!* Her, with her white hair and white skin and two great big black holes for eyes! She looks like a ghost! She isn't worth—"

I roared and charged. He stepped nimbly out of the way. I charged right past him and into the bathroom. "Where's your razor?" I shouted. "Where's the soap?" And I dove into the shower.

When I came out of the bathroom and started climbing into some clothes, he demanded an explanation. "What did I say? What did I do?" He was hopping exultantly from one foot to the other.

"You said it a long while back," I said. "So did Beatrice Dix. Something about, 'He'll annoy you just as long as he finds the girl attractive.' " I laced the second shoe, demanded some money, and pounded out before I had the sentence well finished.

I rang somebody else's bell at the apartment house and when the buzzer burped at me I headed for the stairs. I rang Iola's bell and waited breathlessly. The knob turned and I crowded right in. She was drawing a negligee about her. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Gus!" She drew back, turned and ran to a lamp table. "Oh, you *fool!* Why do you have to make it harder for us?" She moved so fast I couldn't stop her. She had the gun in her hand.

"Hold on, you little dope!" I roared. "That may be a way out, but you're not going out alone. We're

going together!"

"Gus—"

"And doing it together we're not doing it that way! Give me that thing!" I strode across the room, lifted it out of her hand. I opened the magazine, took the barrel in one hand and the butt in the other and twisted them apart, throwing the pieces at her feet. "Now get in there and get dressed. We've got things to do!" She hesitated, and I pushed her roughly toward the bedroom. "One of us is going to dress you," I said somberly.

She squeaked and moved. I tramped up and down the living room, gleefully kicking the broken gun on every trip. She was ready in about four minutes; she came out frightened and puzzled and radiant. I took her wrist and dragged her out of the apartment. As soon as we passed under the garlic on the door, my skin began to tingle, then to itch, and suddenly I felt that I was a mass of open, festering sores. And on top of this came the slime again. I gritted my teeth and sluiced down my pain with sheer exultation.

We piled into a taxi and I gave an address. When Iola asked questions I laughed happily. We pulled up at a curb and I paid off the driver. "Go on in there," I said.

"A beauty parlor! But what—"

I pushed her in. A white-uniformed beautician came forward timidly. I took a strand of Iola's white hair and tossed it. "Dye this," I said. "Dye it black!"

"Gus!" gasped Iola. "You're mad! I don't *want* to be a brunette! I haven't the coloring for—"

"Coloring? You know what kind of coloring you have, with those big black holes of eyes and that white skin and hair? *You look like a ghost!* Don't you see? That's why he hounded you! That's why he loved you and was jealous of you!"

Her eyes got very bright. She looked in a mirror and said, "Gus—you remember that summer I told you about, when he first spoke to me? I was wearing a long white dress—white shoes—"

"Get in there and be a brunette," I growled. The operator took her.

I settled down into a big chair to wait. I was suffering a thousand different agonies, a hundred different kinds of torments. Pains and horrid creeping sensations flickered over my body the way colors shift on a color-organ. I sat there taking it, and taking it, and then I heard the operator's voice from the back of the studio. "There you are, ma'am. All done. Look in there—how do you like it?"

And deep within me I almost heard a sound like a snort of disgust, and then there was a feeling like an infinite lightening of pressure. And then my body was fresh and whole again, and the ghostly pains were gone.

Iola came out and flung her arms around my neck. As a brunette she was stunning.

Henry Gade was our best man.

Numbering its audience in the millions today, the CBS radio-television program series Suspense *for a number of years has ranked as one of the finest dramatic programs on the air. It has brought to perfection a new type of high-tension presentation—in tune with our time, in harmony with modern concepts of gripping entertainment.*

In each issue, the magazine Suspense *will present one of the distinguished scripts which have made broadcasting history. The initial choice,* Honeymoon Terror, *was originally given over the CBS network in November, 1943, under the title* Cabin B-13, *starring Margo and Phillip Dorn.*

HONEYMOON *terror*

JOHN DICKSON CARR

THE TWENTY-FIVE-THOUSAND-TON Maurevania *stands at her North River pier. It is the night of her departure for Europe. Whistles sound. A band on the first-class deck is loudly playing. Steam winches rattle as cargo is lowered into the hold. Under strings of lights, the entire ship is bustling with activity. Standing at the head of the gangplank, the Second Officer watches two figures hurrying tardily through the customs shed towards the liner. . . .*

Richard Brewster, *35, has a pleasant and assured manner, but seems worried. His wife,* Anne, *in her late twenties, obviously is under severe emotional strain—almost, it appears, at the brink of hysteria. They approach the gangplank.*

ANNE: (*Breathlessly*) It's all right, Ricky! We're not too late!

RICHARD: I told you we'd make it.

ANNE: A honeymoon in Europe! Three whole months with nothing to worry about.

RICHARD: (*Gently*) That's right, darling. And the honeymoon has started already. You've been my wife for—let's see—practically five hours.

ANNE: I believe the correct phrase is...This is so *sudden,* Mr. Brewster.

RICHARD: So sudden, my dear, that

we haven't had time to get a husband-and-wife passport and must travel on our separate ones. I hope folks don't think you're not an honest woman!

ANNE: (*Amused*) I'm going to act like a complete wanton, just to devil you. (*Notices Second Officer at head of gangplank*) Do we give our tickets to him?

RICHARD: No. The cabin steward will be around to collect them.

ANNE: And...the money, Ricky?

RICHARD: (*Worried*) It's a lot of money, Anne. Ten thousand dollars in cash. Maybe I'd better turn it over to the purser for safekeeping.

ANNE: Yes. Maybe that would be best....Wait a minute, Ricky. Do you mind if we—if we just stand here a second, before we go up the gangplank?

RICHARD: (*Quickly...Concerned*) What's the matter? You're not ill, Anne?

ANNE: No. But—getting over brain fever isn't any joke. (*Looks away from him*) Oh, I know I should be eager and happy. Like all those people up there. But I get fancies. Queer, dark fancies. All I can think of, sometimes, is the night and the wind and all the black water—

RICHARD: (*Sharply*) Snap out of it, Anne. That's exactly the kind of morbid dreaming I'm trying to cure you of!

ANNE: I know, Ricky. I—I'll be good. But I was just thinking of a story.

RICHARD: What story?

ANNE: (*Quickly*) Never mind. Which way do we go?

RICHARD: Through that door. Then down the elevator to B Deck. And no more horrors, understand?

By this time they are at the head of the gangplank, walking past the Second Officer. Waiting their turn in the crowd, they finally are lowered into the luxurious interior of the ship.

RICHARD: Here we are, Anne. B Deck, and Cabin Number...(*Looks closely at tickets, then back at* Anne

. . . about the author

John Dickson Carr, of course, ranks beyond doubt among the best known and best regarded writers in the mystery field. So prolific is he that he found it necessary to divide himself into three. Under his own name, and as Carter Dickson and Carr Dickson, he has turned out some 45 novels—one for each year of his age! Born in Uniontown, Pa., he found it necessary to remove to Washington while still a child because his father was suddenly elected a Congressman. At 14, he began covering murder trials for a newspaper. In 1932, seeking background for his crime writings, he traveled to London, and there married. Today he lives in a New York suburb with his family, but retains membership in London's Detection Club.

who is coming up behind him). . . Good Lord! B-thirteen!

ANNE: Thirteen!

RICHARD: (*Uneasily*) You're not superstitious, are you?

ANNE: (*Amused*) Not about things like that, dear. Open the door.

RICHARD: Here we are. Lights on, and. . . .

ANNE: (*Delighted*) Ricky! It's a *beautiful* cabin!

RICHARD: Best I could get, dear. I see they've got our luggage in, anyway. (*Mock solemnity*) And over there, madam, you'll find a basket of fruit and some books from your obedient servant.

ANNE: You *are* nice to me. (*Impulsively*) I'm feeling so much better. I'll be all right, darling.

RICHARD: Of course you will. But you'll not find any detective novels among those books. . .

ANNE: (*Uncomfortably*) Please, Ricky!

RICHARD: Detective stories may be all right for presidents and college professors; but they're straight poison to you, my dear. You'll read love stories, and like it.

ANNE: Talking of stories, Ricky, I keep thinking and thinking about that one I mentioned.

RICHARD: What one?

ANNE: Oh, an old story. . .you probably know it, but it was new to me. A woman and her daughter arrive in Paris and go to a hotel. . . .

RICHARD: You mean the old Paris Exposition story?

ANNE: That's it! The daughter goes out. When she returns, her mother has disappeared and even the hotel room isn't the same. The proprietor swears that the girl came there alone, and that there never *was* any mother. The girl goes to the police, and they won't believe her, and she's driven nearly crazy. Of course, it turns out that the mother caught bubonic plague and died, and the authorities are hushing it up so that visitors won't keep away from the city and ruin the exposition. . . .

RICHARD: (*Quietly*) You've got to stop this kind of talk, Anne.

ANNE: I know. But imagine being in a situation like that. Coming back and finding your mother gone and the room's whole appearance changed. . .with strange eyes staring at you and denying what you knew to be true. . .until you began to wonder if you'd lost your reason. . .Richard, listen!

Sound of a brassy gong, repeatedly struck with stick, is heard from corridor outside cabin, accompanied by a voice.

VOICE: All ashore that's going ashore! All ashore that's going ashore!

Gong sounds again.

RICHARD: That's the last call, Anne. We'll be under way any minute.

ANNE: You know, Ricky, I would like to see the skyline go past. And the Statue of Liberty, all lit up.

RICHARD: Then why don't you go up and take a look? I've got to deposit this money in the purser's office on C Deck.

ANNE: But, Ricky, I. . .I don't like you to be away from me!

RICHARD: (*Reasoning with her*) Now look here. You don't think *I'm* going to disappear, do you?

ANNE: (*Upset*) I suppose not. When I get these ideas—and I can't help it, Ricky!—I wish you'd wallop me.

RICHARD: I'm not going to wallop you, Anne. But we've got to find *some* way out of this. You can't go on being afraid whenever I leave you for a minute. *You* certainly won't disappear, in a crowded ship with any number of people all around you. As for me. . .(*Laughs*) . . .I'd defy Houdini himself to make *me* vanish. . .

ANNE: (*Crying out*) Don't *talk* like that!

RICHARD: I'm not going to vanish any more than this cabin will—so run along, dear. I'll join you on deck as soon as I can.

On deck, Anne joins the crowd at the rail. The Second Officer has ordered the gangplank drawn in. Passengers are waving hands, shouting goodbyes to the throng on the pier.

ANNE: (*Muttering*) Such happy people! Nothing to worry about. Nothing on their minds except. . . .

HEINRICH: Except seasickness, madam?

ANNE: Oh! *Oh!*

HEINRICH: (*Speaks with slight accent*) I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to startle you.

ANNE: I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I—I haven't been very well.

HEINRICH: (*Gravely*) I noticed it, madam. . .if you'll forgive me. That's why I spoke to you. As you see by my uniform, I am the ship's doctor.

ANNE: This is a British ship, isn't it? You don't seem very British.

HEINRICH: I am an Austrian, madam. But I fled my country in the days of dark shirts and vacant heads. Dr. Paul Heinrich, at your service.

ANNE: I'm Mrs. Brewster, Doctor. Anne Brewster. When does the ship go?

HEINRICH: In just a moment, Mrs. Brewster. . . .

The ship's whistle gives two thunderous blasts. The band strikes up Auld Lang Syne, *and a loud chorus of goodbyes rises from the rail and the crowded pier below. The ship begins to throb.*

1ST PASSENGER: (*Yelling*) The car key is in the living room table drawer! The living room!

2ND PASSENGER: (*Woman*) Goodbye, Tommy. If you go out with any blondes, I'll kill you when I'm back.

3RD PASSENGER: Yes, dear! Of *course* I'll behave myself in Paris! (*Under his breath*) What time does the bar open aboard this tub?

ANNE: We're moving, aren't we?

HEINRICH: Yes. Don't you feel the vibration of the engines? (*Strains of* Auld Lang Syne *fade*) Is this your first crossing, Mrs. Brewster?

ANNE: I'm afraid it is, Dr. Heinrich. (*She starts walking toward the opposite rail to get a better look at the skyline. He walks with her*) But

my husband's crossed many times, he tells me. I hope I don't get seasick. If I do, I'll rush straight to you, Doctor.

HEINRICH: Let me tell you a secret. There are two common ailments for which medical science has no cure. One is ordinary seasickness and the other is hangover. Tomorrow morning I shall be dealing with plenty of both! (*Shrugs*) How do you like the *Maurevania?*

ANNE: A magnificent ship, from what I've seen of her. And they've given us such a nice cabin down on B Deck. B-thirteen. (*Pause, then sharply*) What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?

HEINRICH: Pardon me. Did you say. . .B-thirteen?

ANNE: Is that remarkable?

HEINRICH: You're quite sure, Mrs. Brewster?

ANNE: Of course! I saw the number on the door.

HEINRICH: That's strange! You see, Mrs. Brewster. . . .

ANNE: Go on, Dr. Heinrich!

HEINRICH: There's no such cabin aboard this ship.

Anne passes her hand before her eyes. Then she looks fiercely at Heinrich.

ANNE: You're joking.

HEINRICH: No, Mrs. Brewster. Because some people are superstitious many ships, including this one, omit number thirteen on each deck. You must have been mistaken.

ANNE: What are you trying to tell me? Do you think I saw something that wasn't there? I'll show you! I'll prove to you that my cabin is number thirteen! Will you come with me to B Deck?

HEINRICH: (*Slowly*) I think perhaps I should, Mrs. Brewster.

They reach B Deck. Anne calls out for the stewardess, who comes running up to them. She is a stout and elderly Cockney, at the moment rather short of breath.

STEWARDESS: (*Panting*) Yes, miss! What can I do for you?

ANNE: (*Desperately*) Tell me, stewardess. This is B Deck, isn't it?

STEWARDESS: (*Puzzled*) B Deck, miss? Yes, miss. No doubt about that.

ANNE: Then take Dr. Heinrich and me to Cabin B-thirteen.

STEWARDESS: Thirteen!

HEINRICH: I've been trying to convince this lady that there is no cabin numbered thirteen aboard this ship.

STEWARDESS: (*Earnestly*) There sure to 'eaven isn't, miss. Never 'as been. I've served aboard the *Maurevania* a matter of eight years. I ought to know.

ANNE: I tell you I saw it! I was in it! A big cabin, with private bath. Light oak panels. The furniture was rosewood and yellow satin; the portholes were like real windows.

STEWARDESS: (*Dubiously*) Many cabins along 'ere look about like that.

HEINRICH: Just which door was it, do you think? Can you show us, Mrs. Brewster? I mean, regardless of the number on it—

ANNE: (*Confused*) They look so

much the same. I can't tell one door from another.

HEINRICH: Well, what name was the cabin booked in, if I may ask?

ANNE: Brewster, naturally! Mr. and Mrs. Richard E. Brewster.

STEWARDESS: There's no Brewster on my list, miss—uh—ma'am.

ANNE: I tell you, I was in there. The luggage had been delivered. I saw it!

STEWARDESS: I don't remember any luggage with a "Brewster" label on it.

ANNE: (*Suddenly laughs with relief*) Wait! There may be a partial explanation for all this. Ricky—that's my husband—Ricky and I have only been married a very short time. When my maid filled out the baggage labels, she must have used my maiden name. I never noticed at the time. . . .

STEWARDESS: And what might that name be, ma'am?

ANNE: Thornton. Anne Marie Thornton.

STEWARDESS: (*Heartily, relieved*) Lord ma'am, why didn't you say so before? Two suitcases and a little trunk! They're in B-sixteen right now.

ANNE: (*Swiftly*) Where's B-sixteen?

STEWARDESS: Right behind you, ma'am.

ANNE: (*Whirls. Watches stewardess unlock door and throw it open*) But. . .but where's my husband's luggage?

STEWARDESS: (*Firmly*) No gentleman's luggage ever was in that cabin, ma'am—uh—miss. Your 'usband's or (*Significantly*) any other gentleman's, if you know what I mean.

ANNE: I won't stand for this! (*In frenzy*) Where's Ricky? What have you done with him?

HEINRICH: Please, Mrs. Brewster. There's one easy way to settle this. Look down the corridor. You notice that man coming toward us, the one with the two gold stripes on his sleeve? That's our Second Officer. Ever see him before?

ANNE: (*Excitedly*) Of course! He was standing at the top of the gangplank when Ricky and I came aboard!

HEINRICH: Exactly. He may be able to tell us something. (*Calls to Second Officer—who is young, breezy and British*)

SECOND OFFICER: Yes, Dr. Heinrich. What's up?

HEINRICH: Would you mind coming here for a moment?

SECOND OFFICER: (*Affably*) Not at all, old fellow. Always glad to oblige the chap who may have to cut me up at any moment. What's up?

HEINRICH: Take a look at this young lady. Ever seen her before?

SECOND OFFICER: I should say so! Any passenger as pretty as that gets special attention from the old nautical eye. I noticed her immediately when she started to board—and followed her right up the gangplank.

HEINRICH: (*Casually*) And, of course, you saw the gentleman who was with her?

SECOND OFFICER: (*Puzzled*) Gentleman?

ANNE: (*Wildly*) Yes! Yes! Yes!

SECOND OFFICER: (*In mild tone*) But there was no gentleman with you. No one at all!

HEINRICH: You're quite certain?

SECOND OFFICER: My dear doctor, she was the last of 'em to come aboard. And I'll take my Bible oath there was no other passenger with her. Or ahead of her or behind her, if it comes to that!

ANNE: You're lying. You're lying to me.

HEINRICH: Please, Mrs. Brewster. Lower your voice.

ANNE: I know what this is. The old Paris trick, like in the story. You won't get away with it, do you hear? I'll go to the purser. I'll go to the captain. I'll. . .(*Breaking off, almost in tears*) . . . Dear Father in heaven, won't anybody believe me?

Several hours later. Through the black night the S. S. Maurevania *is battling severe headwinds twenty miles off Ambrose light. In the Captain's quarters just abaft the bridge, several of the ship's officers are in conference. Outside, clinging to the bulkhead rail, a frightened girl is waiting. The door to the Captain's cabin opens. .* .Heinrich's *portly figure emerges. . .*

HEINRICH: You can come in now, Mrs. Brewster. Captain Wainwright is ready to see you. (*Helps her*) Here, hold on to me. We're pitching rather badly. . .Easy! (*They enter Captain's cabin*)

CAPTAIN: Well, let's try to reach some decision on this matter. Will you sit down next to my desk, Miss Thornton?

ANNE: (*Controlling herself*) The name is Brewster, Captain. Mrs. Anne Brewster.

CAPTAIN: Of course. Whatever you say. Now I might tell you, ma'am, that I've got a lot on my mind already. The First Officer comes aboard with an attack of flu. I'm facing an equinoctial gale short-handed. And now *this* has to happen!

ANNE: I can't help that, Captain. What did you do with my Ricky?

CAPTAIN: Now, one moment please, while I get this straight. By this time, I understand, you yourself have personally interviewed practically every passenger aboard this ship. Is that true?

ANNE: Yes, but. . .

CAPTAIN: But none saw your alleged husband. Is *that* true?

ANNE: (*Desperately*) Yes! That's true! But. . .

CAPTAIN: Meanwhile, the purser has sent a squad to search every square inch of the ship. Not a soul is hidden anywhere. Your husband or anyone else. You can take my word for that! And according to our Second Officer. . .he's standing right there. . . .

ANNE: (*Grimly*) I see him.

CAPTAIN: Yes . . . according to him, no husband ever came aboard with you.

SECOND OFFICER: Hang it all, Miss Thornton, you needn't look at me

like that. I couldn't see a chap who wasn't there. Now could I?

CAPTAIN: I'm not unreasonable, Mrs. Brewster. But what can I do? Can you offer any evidence, even, that this "husband" ever existed?

HEINRICH: Pardon me, Captain. May I ask a question or two?

CAPTAIN: Go right ahead. This looks like a mystery more for you than me.

HEINRICH: If you are married, Mrs. Brewster, you must be carrying a joint husband-and-wife passport. Where is it?

ANNE: There wasn't time to get one.

HEINRICH: I see. Still, there must be someone back in the States who can confirm what you say. Shall we radio your parents?

ANNE: My parents are dead.

HEINRICH: What about relatives, then? Or a guardian?

ANNE: (*Wryly*) My "guardian" is a trust company.

HEINRICH: But somebody must have performed the ceremony! A justice of the peace?

ANNE: Yes. Of course. But—I don't remember the name of the town.

CAPTAIN: (*Staggered*) What!

HEINRICH: (*Quickly*) Hold tight to your chair, Mrs. Brewster. The ship's going to pitch again.

CAPTAIN: (*In sharp tone*) How's the glass looking?

SECOND OFFICER: Barometer's rising, sir. This weather won't hold.

CAPTAIN: Where were we? (*To* Anne) You mean to say . . . ?

ANNE: It was some little place in upstate New York, where they marry you at a moment's notice. I haven't been well. Ricky had been away, and when he came back he sort of swept me off my feet, and . . . (*Despairingly*) . . . Oh, what's the use?

CAPTAIN: If you'll take my advice, ma'am, you'll go below to your cabin and get some sleep. I'll send the doctor down to fix you a sedative, and—

ANNE: (*Angry*) You think I'm crazy, don't you? (*Groping*) I can't understand *why* you'd want to do this! Can it be bubonic plague?

HEINRICH: Who said anything about bubonic plague? What gives you such an idea?

CAPTAIN: Maybe she *is* crazy.

ANNE: All right. I'm going below. You're all against me, except maybe the doctor. But I'll show you! I'll prove what I say is the truth! Just don't anybody follow me, understand? I'm perfectly able to take care of myself. (*She goes out*)

SECOND OFFICER: Whew! I'm glad that's over.

CAPTAIN (*Worried*) Look here. Do you think it's safe to trust her out there alone? She's mad as a hatter, if you ask me. She might get a notion to chuck herself overboard.

SECOND OFFICER: I'll go after her!

HEINRICH: Wait! (*Calmly*) Gentlemen, that girl is as sane as we are.

CAPTAIN: (*Amazed*) That's your professional opinion?

HEINRICH: Of course. I've been closely observing her . . . talking to

her all evening. There's not a psychopathic trait in her nature. And she firmly believes in this husband—

SECOND OFFICER: Some people believe they're Napoleon—

HEINRICH: This is not a joking matter, sir. If she believes in him, I tell you the man exists—or did exist.

CAPTAIN: What do you mean—did exist?

HEINRICH: Suppose he's been murdered and thrown overboard.

CAPTAIN: Are you going daft too?

HEINRICH: If you remember, Richard Brewster was carrying a large sum of money in cash: his wife's wedding gift and practically all her inheritance. He meant to take it to the purser's office. But he never got there. That money might have been a temptation to . . .

CAPTAIN: (*Loudly*) To whom?

HEINRICH: To a stewardess, perhaps. Or even (*Thoughtfully*) to a ship's officer.

SECOND OFFICER: Just exactly what are you getting at?

HEINRICH: Numbers on doors can be changed easily enough. Just print any number you please on a small card and slip it into the metal slot.

SECOND OFFICER: I still want to know what you're driving at.

HEINRICH: Use your intelligence, gentlemen, and I think you'll understand how a man can be made to vanish into thin air, and why you, the Second Officer, saw no passenger board the ship with Mrs. Brewster. What, you still don't see it?

CAPTAIN: No!

HEINRICH: Well, I've no proof yet, so I won't explain. But it's plain as the nose on your face!

During this discussion, Anne *has been making her way down to Cabin B-sixteen. She sits on her bunk, sleepless, staring out through the porthole at the black night and angry water. The* S. S. Maurevania *creeps blindly, at barely eight knots, through a thick and strangling fog. Her foghorn blasts at intervals; she pitches heavily. It is nearly four o'clock. Suddenly the inter-cabin telephone rings sharply.*

ANNE: (*With a frightened start*) What's that? Oh, the telephone! (*Lifts receiver*) Hello! Hello!

RICHARD: (*Through telephone*) It's me, Anne. (*Warningly*) Easy, now.

ANNE: Ricky! Oh, darling. Where *are* you? Are you hurt?

RICHARD: No. I'm not hurt. But—he nearly got me.

ANNE: *Who?*

RICHARD: Listen, dear. I can't explain over the phone. And I don't dare try to get down there. Can you meet me on the top deck, where all the lifeboats are slung.

ANNE: I can find it.

RICHARD: Go to the starboard side —that's the right-hand side facing forward—and find the fourth lifeboat from the aft companionway. Nobody will see us. I . . . (*Breaks off*)

ANNE: Ricky! Ricky! (*Replaces telephone*) He's gone! (*She seizes a wrap, goes out into the corridor. As she runs toward the companionway she stops suddenly, thinking she hears footsteps behind her. She lis-*

tens, hears nothing, decides she must have been mistaken. She makes her way upward through the dark and silent ship until at last she reaches the boat deck. Dense fog shrouds the deck.

Anne *finds the first lifeboat, fights her way past the second and third.*

RICHARD: Anne! Is that you?

ANNE: Ricky! Ricky, darling. Where are you?

RICHARD: Here. Under the lifeboat. Take my hand and duck under.

ANNE: But isn't it horribly dangerous there on the edge? There's no railing!

RICHARD: Don't worry, darling. I won't let you fall . . . *Look out!* (*Ship pitches*)

ANNE: Oh, you caught me just in time.

RICHARD: (*Shaken*) If we went overboard here, we wouldn't have a chance. We're well aft, near the propellers. The suction would carry us right down into the blades, and . . . Listen! (*Foghorn sounds*)

ANNE: The foghorn?

RICHARD: No . . . Footsteps! I can see a flashlight. Anne—did someone follow you here?

HEINRICH (*Suavely*) You're quite right, my friend. I did. (*Turns flashlight full on them*).

ANNE: Dr. Heinrich! What are you doing here?

HEINRICH: At the moment, young lady, I am covering both of you with a revolver. Please don't move.

ANNE: So you were in the conspiracy too!

HEINRICH: May I ask what conspiracy?

ANNE: Why, the whole ship's conspiracy to say that Richard Brewster didn't exist!

HEINRICH: My dear young lady, you can set your mind at rest. There never was any ship's conspiracy against you. Everyone you spoke to was perfectly honest.

ANNE: (*Bitterly*) Including the Second Officer, I suppose. He was telling the truth, was he, when he said nobody came up the gangplank before or after me?

HEINRICH: Beg pardon. That's not what he said. He said no *passenger* came up the gangplank with you.

ANNE: I don't see . . .

HEINRICH: Young lady, a great crime is arranged for tonight. No less a crime than murder.

ANNE: Murder! Who's going to be murdered?

HEINRICH: You are.

ANNE: *What!*

HEINRICH: That, I repeat, is the scheme. But there is no conspiracy, and only one criminal.

ANNE: For God's sake, who?

HEINRICH: That man beside you.

ANNE: (*Laughs wildly*) Ricky! Listen to him! What's he talking about? He's out of his mind.

HEINRICH: Not at all. Our young Second Officer, of course, did see *someone* walk up the gangplank—loitering behind you. But he never dreamed of associating that person in any way with you. He saw a ship's officer, returning from shore leave in

civilian clothes. (Anne *gasps. Foghorn sounds*) That man you call your husband—his name is not Richard Brewster. His real name is Blaney, and he happens to be the First Officer of the *Maurevania.*

ANNE: Ricky! Do you hear him? Tell him he's wrong.

HEINRICH: Oh, the Captain will be able to identify him, all right. He's quite British, though he can fake an American accent, I should guess. He already has a wife in England, and he's planning to join her with the ten thousand dollars he got from *you!*

ANNE: I don't believe it. (*Desperately*) I *can't* believe it!

HEINRICH: He planned cleverly, I admit. He never let you know he was a seaman. . . . And once he had you on board, he managed to precede you to the cabin, hang a dummy number on the door, remove it later while you were talking to me on deck, put on his uniform and walk away with his own luggage.

ANNE: But Captain Wainwright told us the First Officer had come aboard. . . .

HEINRICH: With a bad attack of flu. Yes. Our friend couldn't be seen in public until after he had disposed of you. The best thing was to convince everybody that you were insane —as he did with that cabin-number trick. Then, when you went overboard tonight, well . . .

ANNE: Everyone would believe it suicide.

HEINRICH: Exactly. But I began to suspect this "Brewster" because you quoted him as telling you such an obvious lie. He said he'd never traveled on the *Maurevania.* But according to your story, he could direct you all over the ship and even knew just where the purser's office was. So I went to his cabin—found it empty—searched it and discovered your ten thousand dollars. After that, I just waited outside your door until he called you. . . .

ANNE: (*Screams*) Look out, Dr. Heinrich! He's got something. A piece of iron!

HEINRICH: Put it down, you fool! Put it. . . . (*He fires three shots in quick succession. The ship pitches; Richard shrieks, plunges . . .*)

ANNE: He's overboard! You shot him!

HEINRICH: Those shots never touched him. I was aiming over his head. The weight of the iron carried him over backwards when he lifted it. It was the weight he was going to use to sink your body. (*A faint shriek rises from below*)

ANNE: (*Realizing*) The propellers.

HEINRICH: They suck you under.

ANNE: Oh, Doctor. . . . I can't stand this. I can't stand it!

HEINRICH: It isn't easy, my dear, I know. But believe me, it is better this way.

MYSTERY NOVELETTE

FACES *turned*

JOHN GEARON

Few are the masters of the mystery short story—but even fewer are the masters of the mystery long story. This most difficult of vehicles calls for all the sweep, scope and suspense of a novel, packed into the many less pages—and often pocket-sized pages, at that—allotted a novelette. To paint broadly on such small canvas requires technical skill of a kind akin to that shown by our top radio writers who, into the brief space of half an hour, must contrive to force dramas which in effect are full length.

This may explain John Gearon's success with the novella *form, since he has written for* Suspense *on both radio and television. A New Yorker whose mid-thirties find him safely married, he began his career at a tender age by writing plays for his six brothers and sisters to act in. Later he collaborated with Louis Bromfield on the Broadway-produced* DeLuxe, *then wrote* The Velvet Well, *a novel shortly to appear as a film.*

THE GILT CLOCK on the mantel stood at ten twenty-five and through the French windows he could see a sliver of moon. The house was very still. He went to the phone and called Laura Williams.

"Bert Mason speaking. Is Myra there?"

"M y r a? N o. Should she be here?"

"Dunno. Just got in from a business dinner in t o w n. We're supposed to go to the Wilsons' p a r t y. But—n o wife."

"Wives get tired of waiting, darling. Especially in this damned town! She's probably gone on ahead to the Wilsons."

"Yes, I suppose. You and Roger going?"

"Virus has caught up with Roger again."

"Too bad; give him my best," he said and hung up.

He stood there a moment, his hand still on the phone, trying to shake off a vague uneasiness. Dead leaves rustled in the wood beyond the garden.

Did Myra cheat?
Her husband laughed at the idea.
But Pete Kelly, being a cop,
figured it explained her disappearance!

AGAINST *him*

It was a mild night for October; a humid breeze stirred the silk draperies at the open windows. He heard a faint sound in the hall and stiffened. Perkins, the Maltese cat, appeared in the doorway, froze there tail erect, blue eyes transfixed. Bert laughed and said, "It's only me, Perkins. We've both got the jitters!"

He went upstairs to change into a dinner jacket and found the bedroom in a mess. Myra's day dress was thrown over the foot of the bed; underclothes and a large damp bath towel were draped over a chair; the dressing table was a litter of powder, used Kleenex and open bottles of lotions. People had picked up after Myra all her life.

Suddenly, irrationally, a sense of bereavement overcame him, a loneliness more complete, more final than anything he had experienced even during the lost and lonely days of his childhood. Their backs are turned, he thought; their faces are averted. He stood frozen in the act of knotting his tie, unable to account for the intensity of his emotion. A night-bird shrieked, far away and totally unreal, a dream bird uttering a dream sound.

If I don't watch out, he thought, I'll be as neurotic as the rest of them.

He shook off the mood, finished dressing, regarded the result in the mirror, then went down to the car and drove to the Wilsons'. They had been asked for ten-thirty, but so far there were only a few cars parked in the long sweep of the drive. Inside the big Tudor house an orchestra was playing one of those Nineteen-Twenty tunes. Irene Wilson, trailing tulle and ribbons and bows, bustled up to meet him at the door and immediately asked, "Where's Myra?"

"I thought I'd find her here."

He looked around. The furniture had been cleared out of the big hall. Over near the stairs was a five-piece orchestra. Two or three couples were dancing and they nodded and waved.

Through an archway he could see Milt at the bar.

"Oh, you know Myra," Irene said. "She probably decided to go to dinner at the Bronsons' or somewhere."

He walked through the room smiling and waving and when he got to the bar said, "Started early, you son-of-a-gun."

"No earlier than usual," Milt said. "What are you having?"

"Where's Myra?" Lillian asked over Milt's shoulder. Bert noticed she didn't look as well as usual. Her well-scrubbed casual beauty was mitigated by a tightness around her eyes and her hair was plastered and set like iron.

"Run out on me, I guess," he said with a laugh.

Milt put down his glass on the bar. "Huh?"

"She wasn't home when I got back from town. Guess she decided to go to one of the dinners."

"Myra's not the type who fills in at the last minute," Lillian said, voice curiously flat.

"Not home," Milt said blankly. Then he shot a quick look at his wife and said to the bartender, "Same again, Jake."

"Now, Milt . . ." Lillian said.

"Don't begin nagging, Lil. I've had a helluva day."

"He's been over in Hartford on what we laughingly call 'business'," Lil said. "He didn't get home until nine."

Milt grinned. "But I always do get home, don't I, baby?"

"How *is* business, Milt?" Bert asked.

Milt stopped smiling. "Same old crap. What's it to you?"

The guests in the vicinity stopped talking. From the end of the bar Joe Mellon said, "Take it easy, Milt."

But Milt was already moving away from them. He waved to a tall blonde in white satin who had just entered the room. "It can't be real," Milt said gayly. "I've been waiting for it all my life!"

"He doesn't mean anything," Bert said to Lillian.

"Let's dance, Bert," she said.

They moved out into the hall and Lillian said: "He didn't mean to be rude, Bert. You know he thinks you're about tops. I don't know what's got into him tonight. You may not believe it but up until today he's been on the wagon for almost three weeks."

She moved stiffly in his arms. He thought she didn't follow very well and couldn't understand it. She seemed to dance all right with other men. It was the same, though, with all of them, he reminded himself.

"Sometimes I wish we could move away from here and get a fresh start," she said. "Somewhere where he could forget the responsibility of all those ancestors hanging on the walls. No one understands him here. No one but women. And you . . ."

"What's wrong, Lil? Money again?"

"Oh, it's always money. But something more—"

"You're too attractive a woman to look so worried."

"Thanks, Bert," she said mechanically. She didn't look into his eyes.

He held her tighter. She didn't resist nor did she respond.

"Later," she said, "when it won't be so noticeable, walk out to the pool with me. There's something I want to talk about."

"Sure, Lil," he whispered.

Still she didn't respond. She's being careful, he thought.

As they circled the room she chattered mechanically. Bert and Myra and the Wilsons were about the only ones who asked Lil and Milt to parties anymore. The room was filling up and Lil's last year's gown looked shabby against the shimmer of new silk and moire and satin.

"That's the Bronsons' dinner party coming in now," she said. "But I don't see Myra."

"That's funny," Bert said. "Where in the devil can she be?"

And then Bert was aware that she was trembling.

"What's wrong, Lil?"

"Wrong? Nothing." Then she added quickly, "Yes, there is too. You're a damned fool, Bert. A blind . . ."

He steered her into a laughing group at the foot of the stairs. She stopped whatever she had started to say but she hung on to him. With a smile he disentangled himself.

"I'm going back to the house," he said.

He left her there, tight-lipped with annoyance, and found Irene Wilson.

"I think I'll run back to the house. I'm getting worried about Myra."

"Myra? My goodness! You mean to tell me she didn't come in with the Bronsons?" She smothered a derisive smile. "Maybe she found something more amusing?"

"What does that mean?"

Irene looked flustered. She put her hand on his arm. "Dear Bert. Any woman would be lucky to have you. But Myra is very beautiful and stubborn and used to her own way. The Commodore spoiled her. You never can tell what damned fool notion—"

"She's never done anything like this before."

"Yes. Well dear, I do hope she hasn't been taken suddenly ill or something. This awful virus. Albert says he thinks the Russians . . . Well, here he is! He can tell you about the Russians himself."

Albert Wilson, playful in his late forties, said, "Milt's behaving like a damned oaf in the bar."

"He has such charm!" Irene said with feeling. "I don't know any man with more . . ."

"Charm!" Albert said. "The man can't even hold a job."

"Myra is missing," Irene broke in.

"Missing?"

"That does sound melodramatic, doesn't it? I mean we don't know where she is. Bert's going back to the house . . ."

Albert grinned. "Myra can take care of herself," he said. "Always could."

Bert started for the door. Milt intercepted him. He put his hand on Bert's arm.

"Jus' wanna say . . . sorry . . . the way I acted in the bar. We've been pals so long, and what I've done to you . . .!"

Bert managed a laugh. "Forget it!"

"I'm caught," Milt said. "I'm caught on a trolley. The one that's headed for the end of the line!"

"Nonsense!"

"Nuts, not nonsense, Bertie. Nonsense is an investment banker's word. Anyway . . . it's true. I try to make Lil jump. There's still time for her. She wants to stick. She paid her nickel and she wants to stick."

"Lil is a fine girl. Don't forget we have a date to go fishing on Friday. And skip a few drinks, Milt. Relax."

"What I know doesn't relax me. Bert . . . there's something. . . ."

"Not now."

He left Milt quickly and went to the door. When he looked back he saw Lil crossing the room towards her husband, head high, oblivious to the amused glances.

Bert thought, I wonder if there's something wrong with my heart? His pulse was too fast. There was a sick empty feeling below his chest.

PETER KELLY refused the drink and said: "Don't let your imagination get you, boy. Calm down."

"But I've tried everyone I can think of. She would never have gone off without a word. I mean, of her own free will."

Kelly, though he wore a neat business suit, sat gingerly on the expensive flowered chintz as though afraid to soil it.

"I can tell you this, Bert," he said. "After fifteen years with the cops I've learned one thing. You can never tell what a woman will do next."

Kelly, chief of police, lived in a neat Georgian house—it had cost him fifteen thousand dollars—in a section where the more prosperous 'townies' lived. But Pete didn't belong to the country club and wouldn't have dreamed of trying to join it.

"How about the maid?" he asked.

"This is her day off. She usually spends the night with her folks."

Kelly looked at the coffee table in front of the sofa. On it stood a cocktail shaker, two glasses containing the dregs of martinis, and a twist of lemon peel gone brown.

"You have a drink when you got home?"

"No. I noticed that, too. It wasn't me who drank with her. No one at Irene's party said anything about having taken a drink here with her."

"In that case maybe it was someone you don't know. I understand that Mrs. Mason was . . . well, sort of democratic. . . ?"

Bert was startled. Democratic behavior was the last quality anyone ever had attributed to Myra. He wondered what Kelly was getting at. He waited.

"I mean she was always very friendly with . . . well, say the bartenders at the Golden Eagle or that

other roadhouse on Route 21."

Bert suppressed a smile. But suddenly he found it was not easy to explain to Kelly that sort of 'democracy.' Myra called bartenders and caddies by their first names and assumed an easy air of comradeship with them. How could he explain that it was sort of a game, a snobbish one at that.

Kelly said, "Suppose some friend dropped in unexpectedly . . . she might have gone off with. . . ."

"No. She most certainly would have called Irene Wilson and left a note for me."

Rather uncertain now, Kelly lit a cigarette and tried to look reassuring. He was worried. The Masons were important people. His wife called them a 'bunch of rich bums' but they were the group that had put him in office and kept him there.

"You and the missus have any difference of opinion lately?"

"None."

"When did you see her last?" Kelly made his voice casual.

"About three this afternoon. She took the station wagon and drove into New Haven to pick up an evening gown for the party."

Bert told Kelly he had taken the Lincoln and driven into town in the late afternoon to keep a business appointment with an associate from San Francisco. He had dined at the Metropolitan Club, and had left about eight-thirty to drive back to Elm Hill. When he arrived at the house he found the station wagon in the drive and the rooms lit up, but no sign of Myra. He explained how he had gone on to the Wilsons, assuming that Myra had joined someone for dinner. He told Kelly about the odd moment of uneasiness as he stood dressing in the bedroom.

"Uneasy? About what?"

"I don't know. Just one of those feelings. When I came back from the Wilsons and found she wasn't here the uneasiness increased. That's when I called you."

"Have you looked to see if anything is missing?"

"I thought of that. There's nothing missing. Only a diamond bracelet from Myra's jewel box but I imagine she would have worn that with her evening gown."

"If she changed."

"She must have. The box from the dress shop in New Haven was lying on the floor of the bedroom."

"Any relatives she might have gone to . . .?"

"She has no immediate family."

Kelly stood. He tapped his cigarette in the direction of the ashtray but it missed and the ashes fell to the rug. He felt the color rising to his face. He took a deep breath and said; "Now I don't want to scare you, Bert . . . My hunch is she'll turn up with one of those simple explanations that only a woman could think of . . . but. . . ." He stopped, stooped over, feeling clumsy, and stubbed out the cigarette . . . "It's always wise to take every precaution. I'm going to check on all the bars and roadhouses

in the vicinity. After all, a woman in formal dress would be noticed. I'm going to set up a state wide alarm. And I'm going to ask for volunteers to search the woods."

"The woods!"

Kelly drew himself up. He felt more assured, noting the sudden panic in the other man.

"Now, take it easy. Don't touch anything in this room. I'll have Denby come up and take fingerprints . . . especially the cocktail shaker and glasses. I think when we find out who was here. . . ."

He patted Bert's shoulder.

"We're going to do everything in our power. Don't worry. She'll be home safe and sound in a few hours."

Bert wondered: would she?

LIL OPENED the door. She wore an old tweed skirt and a cashmere sweater and a single strand of pearls. She had lost her healthy outdoor look though. Her eyes dilated and she said rather breathily: "Oh, it's you, Bert. Come in."

Her living room was a litter of Early American, cigarette butts and yesterday's papers.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked tensely.

"Not a word."

"But my God, Bert, she's been gone almost twenty-four hours. She can't just have walked off the face of the earth. What's the matter with Kelly, anyway? Milt always did say he was a bootlicking lughead!"

"I don't know," he said wearily. "I've been out in the woods all night with the searching party. I managed to get a couple of hours sleep after breakfast. Is Milt in?"

"No. He lost the job with the wholesale food people, you know. Spent too much time chewing the rag with his customers. He's gone over to see some friend of Harry's in Middletown. It's to sell insurance again . . . if he gets it!"

"It's a shame," Bert said, "with his brains."

"Oh, we get along," she said defensively. "If only the cats—and I mean the male variety—would let up on him. He drinks a little and he likes people and women find him attractive. He's not the world's greatest business genius but to hear them talk you'd think . . ."

"It's not fun for you," he said.

She looked directly at him for a moment then turned away. "I understand Milt," she said quietly.

"You're a remarkable woman, Lil," he said.

"I don't know why I'm talking about myself . . . with you worried half to death and. . . ."

"I came to warn you," Bert said.

"Warn?" She clasped her hands tight then unclenched them and brushed a stray hair from her forehead. "I could use a drink," she said quickly, "How about you?"

It was bourbon-on-the-rocks in Elm Hill that year. She got rid of half her drink before she said, "O.K. Shoot. I can take it now."

"There's going to be a mess," Bert

said. "Unpleasant gossip."

"Milt and Myra?"

"How did you know?"

Lil hesitated a moment, started to say something, stopped and said instead, "I've known for a long time. That's what I wanted to talk to you about at the party last night. It's a mess, all right, and someone's bound to be hurt."

"Kelly called me a half hour ago. He discovered that Milt met Myra at four yesterday afternoon at a roadhouse outside Southport. The Golden Eagle. They spent a couple of hours there drinking."

"God!" she said. "God, what a fool Milt can be!"

" 'The business trip to Hartford!' "

"Bert," she said anxiously: "You don't think . . . Kelly doesn't think . . . I mean that there's any connection between. . . ."

"*I* don't think so but Kelly may."

"That's ridiculous!"

"That's what I told him."

"I don't understand you!" she said in a shrill voice. "You seem to be taking it awfully calmly . . . I mean about Milt and Myra."

"Listen, Lil," he said quietly. "We all grew up in this town together . . . Milt and Myra and me . . . Milt is my best friend; always has been. Myra was sorry for the way things always seemed to break badly for him. She listened to his troubles. If he felt like drinking, it's just like Myra to keep him company. There is nothing else between them!"

"Saint Bertram!" she said with an incredulous laugh. "Myra certainly has the wool pulled over your eyes."

"You don't like her, do you, Lil?"

"That's neither here nor there. But to tell me she 'listens to his troubles!' Where the hell does that put me?"

"Sometimes a man can say things to another woman that he couldn't say to his wife."

"Oh, Bert! Really!" She finished her drink in one gulp. "Well, never mind what you believe or don't believe. Whatever else there is, I do know Milt had nothing to do with . . . with Myra's disappearance."

"I know that," he said. "I've already told Kelly he's wasting his time. And, I don't want a filthy scandal."

"Kelly should have more sense!"

"Please forgive me for saying this," Bert said quietly, "but we've got to face facts. In Kelly's set a married man meets another man's wife in a roadhouse for only one purpose . . ."

"I know about that. It isn't his fault!"

"Lil!"

"I'm sorry, Bert. Myra was lucky to have found a guy like you."

"*Was* lucky?"

The color drained from her face. "Why did I say that. . .?" Then, "Let's face it, Bert. Most of the better citizens . . . the male most anyway . . . hate Milt. They hate him for enjoying life and odd ducks and misfits and fishermen and hunters and bums around the bars and truckdrivers in all-night lunchrooms. They hate him for not being a stuffed shirt

like his father. And, most of all, they hate him because he confuses them."

Bert sighed. "If only Milt were a little more cooperative." He got up. "Kelly is coming over to get him this evening."

"Get him!" Lil put her glass down with a bang.

"Just routine," Bert said. "He wants to take his fingerprints. There were a couple of martini glasses and a shaker in the living room. Kelly thought maybe Milt came back with Myra from the roadhouse and . . ."

"Fingerprints," she said. "My God, Bert . . . that sounds as though they think . . . They couldn't. Not Milt! Bert, they don't think . . . I mean with Myra . . . something bad."

He put his hands to his eyes, suddenly overcome with an overpowering sense of weariness. He didn't want to think.

"Oh, Bert," she said in a whisper.

At the door he turned. "I'll let you know . . . if . . ." He went out.

THE LAST sunlight, blood red, slanted through the French windows and across the rug that the Commodore's father had brought back from China. Hortense came in from the kitchen.

"There's something," the maid said in a frightened voice. "You'd better come, Mr. Mason."

Bert threw down his paper and followed her. Through the small window over the sink he saw the group of men coming out of the woods. One of them broke away from the others and came running through the garden. Bert met him on the terrace outside the kitchen.

"What's wrong?"

It was Red Smiler, the mechanic at Frost's garage. He stopped dead in his tracks. "I gotta call the Chief," he said.

"What's happened?"

There was sweat on Smiler's forehead. He didn't look at Bert.

"I gotta call," he repeated evasively.

He went past Bert into the kitchen and through the pantry to the hall. He picked up the phone and got through to Kelly.

"Better get right over, Chief," he said. Then after a moment, "Yeah."

He hung up, aware of Bert standing there behind him, and didn't turn.

"You've found her," Bert said.

Smiler didn't answer.

"She's dead," Bert said.

Smiler cleared his throat and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Mason . . . Jesus, I'm sorry!"

Bert went across the hall into the living room and sat on the couch. Smiler followed him to the door, looking scared.

"Tell me," Bert said. "How . . .?"

"Buried in that hollow back of Flat Rock."

"My God!"

"The side of her head," Smiler said and stopped.

"Tell me."

"I'd better not say anything more until the Chief comes."

He turned away and a moment later Bert saw him standing on the

edge of the terrace by the drive. After a bit, Kelly arrived and the two talked in low voices. Kelly shook his head, ran his hand across his throat and looked apprehensively towards the French windows. Bert knew he dreaded coming in. He made it easier for Kelly by going out to him on the terrace.

"She was dressed for a party," Kelly said in a dazed voice. Then as though shocked by his own words, "You go inside, Bert. I don't want you to go out there. There's nothing you can do for the moment. We're going to get the son-of-a-bitch!"

"It must have been a lunatic."

"I'm working fast from now on in. I may want you to go with me when I get back."

"With you, yes," Bert said. "I think maybe . . ." He leaned back against the wall. "It's all right, now. I'll go inside."

The light was fading fast. He went to the living room. On the coffee table lay a mystery book from the circulating library. Myra must have taken it out. I must return it before it mounts up, he thought.

After a while, Kelly came back from the woods. He looked pale and his mouth was set. He carried something bulky in his right hand, something wrapped in what looked like an old torn shirt.

"Maybe you'd better come with me," he said. "You have a right . . ."

Bert stood, very careful and stiff, like a robot. "Certainly," he said. "Anything."

"Don't say anything, Bert," Kelly said as they went up the walk. "Let me handle it."

Lil answered the knock. She looked from Bert to Kelly, then to the bundle held ever so lightly in his hand.

"Sorry to bother you," Kelly said. "Is Mr. Richards in?"

"Yes," she said. "But he's in bed. I had the doctor right after you brought him home. He's running a temperature."

"Mind if I look around?"

"Look around?" Her voice rose an octave. "I certainly *do* mind. This isn't visiting day at the museum!"

Kelly walked right in past her. Startled, Lil said, "What does this mean, Bert? What's happened? What does he want?"

"Come on, Bert!" Kelly called with the warning in his voice.

She turned in the doorway to face Kelly, still not entering the room herself.

"It's Myra," she said.

"Where does your husband keep his tools?" Kelly asked.

"Tools?" She was very white now. "Where he's always kept them, of course," she said. "In the cellar."

Evasion would have been useless. Everyone knew about Milt's hobby.

Kelly started for the cellar door.

"Look here, Pete Kelly," Lil said, "this is pretty damned high-handed!"

"What are you waiting for, Bert?" Kelly's voice was sharp.

Bert turned reluctantly and followed him. Kelly beckoned Bert to descend first. As they went down they

heard Milt call, "What is it, Lil?" And Lil's toneless answer, "You'd better come down."

The workroom contained a long table with an electric saw and a lathe at one end. On the far wall, hanging on separate hooks, was an elaborate set of tools.

Kelly looked around the room, then seemed to lose interest. Milt came down the cellar stairs and into the workroom clutching a rather soiled bathrobe over his pajamas.

"What goes on?" he demanded.

Kelly spoke quietly, "You still deny going back for a cocktail with Mrs. Mason?"

Milt's shoulders sagged. He said, "I suppose you found my fingerprints on that damned glass. I was there."

"They were your fingerprints all right. How come you finally admitted being at the roadhouse with Mrs. Mason but went on denying having gone back to the house with her?"

Milt said nothing.

Lil said, "He didn't want to hurt Bert."

"Hurt him? In what way?"

"Oh, don't be a fool," Lil said. "Milt's going back to the house with her would have looked strange . . ."

"Shut up, Lil!" Milt said. The color rose to his face. "I had a drink with Myra," Milt said doggedly. "Bert wouldn't mind that. I lied because I know the way the Elm Hill mind works. And, Bert . . ."

"You made a mistake, Milt," Bert said. "You should have told Pete the truth. There was no reason not to."

"What did you and Mrs. Mason talk about at the Golden Eagle?" Kelly asked.

Milt hesitated and then said, "She was interested in insurance. We had a discussion."

"According to the bartender it was a pretty heated discussion!"

"What are you getting at!" Lil said. "What the hell are you getting at?"

Kelly pointed to the wall where the tools hung.

"One of your tools is missing, Milt," he said quietly.

Milt looked at the wall. After a moment he said, "That's funny. I hadn't noticed before. My wrench is gone."

"Be careful!" Lil said.

"I found your wrench for you, Milt," Kelly said.

He drew back the cloth from the bundle he held in his hand. There was the wrench with the blue steel handle.

"Found it? Where?"

"In a grave," Kelly said. "In a grave with Myra Mason's body. Get dressed; you're under arrest!"

AFTER the maid had cleared the luncheon dishes, Kelly lit a cigarette. "What's happening now is more important than any silly bridge game," he said. "I can't play, that's all there is to it."

"Madge Roony will never forgive me if I have to call like this at the last minute. It just isn't done."

"I've got a red-hot murder case on my hands."

"Those bums!" Mrs. Kelly said vehemently. "It's no wonder one of them got murdered. Anyway, the way you've bungled the case!"

"Bungled?"

"Milt Richards never killed her!"

"Women!" Kelly said. But he looked troubled. "What makes you so sure? He lied about being with her. His fingerprints were found on the cocktail glass. His wrench was found . . ."

"I don't care whether you caught him with a bomb in his pocket," Mrs. Kelly said with supreme irrelevance. "He didn't do it!"

"But what have you got to go on?"

"What you men never heard of," she said. "Common sense."

Kelly sighed and pushed back his chair.

"Maybe you think it was Bert Mason killed his own wife?"

"Maybe," she said. "More likely you'll find a jealous woman behind it. Just wait . . ."

"That's what I can't afford to do," he said. "I'm driving over to the county coop with Bert Mason this afternoon."

He pushed aside the velvet tassel on the archway separating the dining room from the hall.

"You just pick up that phone and call Madge Roony. It's getting so no one will ask us any more. Why did I ever marry a cop!"

Automatically, Kelly went and picked up the phone and stood there beneath the reproduction of the *Horse Fair* and tried to still the nagging headache. "It's too pat," he thought. "Even a moron couldn't be that stupid. I wonder . . ."

I NEVER thought I was a coward," Lil said. "But I can't go into the village to shop. I can't face them."

The midday sun filtered through a low hanging haze; the air was sultry. They sat in the little arbor near the kitchen door of the house on Magnolia Street. Lil's face was pinched from lack of sleep. Bert looked wan and his pallor was accentuated by the black tie and arm band.

"People are talking about your paying for Milt's lawyer. Imagine that!"

"Let them talk," he said.

"I saw him this morning," she said. "I behaved badly. I wasn't much of a help. Here he is in terrible danger and yet I let him annoy the hell out of me. There's some masochism in him, Bert. . . . I guess it's always been there. I think some part of him rather enjoys this whole thing. It's as though he regards it as the logical conclusion to some horrid comedy."

Above them a gull floated stiffly over the tree tops.

Presently Bert said, "Milt is a boy."

Lil said nothing. She seemed to be waiting.

Bert stiffened his arm, pulled down the white cuff, adjusted a cuff-link.

"He's never accepted responsibility," Bert went on. "We both are fond of him . . . we always will be. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"You need someone you can depend on," he said, casually, as though

he did not expect his words to be taken seriously.

She threw her cigarette into the dead flowers on the edge of the garden and stood.

"There's a strange thing happening in town. Especially among the women. Despite all the evidence, there's a growing feeling that Milt didn't do it."

"I know," he said. "That may help."

"Who next?" she asked in a tight voice. "Someone did it."

Bert sighed and watched the gull floating like plywood and paper over the weed-choked garden.

"I want you to feel . . ." he began, and stopped.

Without turning, still in that tight voice, Lil said, "It's getting colder."

"I guess you know," he said.

He followed her then into the kitchen and after a few minutes left to join Kelly.

THE WINDOWS were up and the heater was on. An hour after noon, cold weather had descended suddenly on New England. The road to Bridgeville and the county jail was like a ribbon of toothpaste squeezed snakelike across the dull brown landscape.

Kelly had been smoking ever since they had left Elm Hill. There were crooked lines of worry across his broad forehead. For a long time the two men were quiet but after a while Kelly said, "I'd like you to tell me, Bert, just why you're so damned sure Milt didn't do it."

"The whole case against Milt is based on the supposition that he was having an affair with my wife. That I know to be completely untrue."

Kelly kept looking straight ahead. Rather painfully he said "Can you be so certain?"

"Yes," Bert said. "Myra would have laughed at the idea."

"This may sound funny," Kelly said after a minute. "But you know, damn it all, Bert, your attitude about Milt is almost *too* Christian."

"Nothing of the sort. Just common sense."

"Common sense!" Kelly repeated unhappily, remembering when last he had heard that word. "You're a great friend of Mrs. Richards?"

"A friend, yes. She's Milt's wife, after all." Bert gave Kelly a quick glance. "I've known Lil for eight years. Ever since Milt brought her home to Elm Hill as his wife."

"What's your opinion of her. I mean off the record?"

Bert's hesitation was barely noticeable. Then he said carefully: "I think she is an exceptionally fine woman. Although she was twenty-eight when she married Milt, I don't think she quite realized . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's face it, Kelly. Milt is not the marrying type. He met Lil when he was stationed at Wright Field during the war. They only knew each other a few weeks before they were married. She came here to Milt's town . . . a stranger . . . and Elm Hill is not an easy place for an outsider."

"It's not always easy for an in-

sider," Kelly said with sharpness.

"Yes," Bert said. And then after a moment, "I think there were scenes in the beginning. I suppose there would have been with any high-spirited woman."

"Scenes about other women?"

Bert looked unhappy. He didn't answer.

"Then she was jealous of him!"

"I suppose you might say so. Not with Myra, of course. They were friends, Lil and Myra."

Kelly made no comment. Bert lowered his window and threw out a half-finished cigarette. His hand was shaking.

JUST after midnight, Albert Williams came home from a meeting of the House Committee of the Elm Hill Country Club. His wife was propped among her pillows reading. Albert grinned at her and said, "Woman's intuition, indeed!"

Irene cocked one eye over the book.

"That shows some sort of secret resentment."

"Not at all. The rat confessed at ten o'clock tonight."

"What rat, dear?" she asked sweetly. "There are so many."

"I mean Milt Richards. He did it all right. He broke down and confessed to everything."

Irene let the book fall into her lap. "He must have been drugged."

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't very well crawl out of this one."

Irene thought a moment. "It's perfectly simple. He's protecting someone."

"Ye gods! Who?"

"Lil."

He laughed. "You women never give up, do you?"

"I can't say I blame her for hitting Myra over the head with a wrench," she said. "But I do think burying her was a bit too much!"

"Just a bit," he said. "You look like peaches and cream among all those pillows."

"Oh, Albert! Sometimes I think I'll send in an appendix about you to the Kinsey report."

"Sometimes I suspect you have a vulgar mind."

"Albert! Well . . . I'm glad I've convinced you about Lil, anyway."

Albert groaned.

BERT was late. Now, just a little before six, he drew up before the house on Magnolia Street. A large moving van stood parked outside.

He found Lil standing in the middle of the living room surrounded by half-packed trunks and packing cases. He stepped aside to let Hank Borden and his helper pass. They were carrying a table.

"I'm sorry. . . ." Bert said, "I was in New Haven."

"It's all right. As long as you came." She wore a simple house dress and no makeup. Her hair hung in wisps from her forehead.

"What's this all about?"

"I'm going away," she said. She was close to tears.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

"It made me feel better," he said, "to find your message at the house."

"I suppose you think it's rotten of me. I'm deserting Milt."

Bert said nothing.

"It was like waking up from a bad dream. Everything I've lived has been a lie. Milt was never the man I thought him to be at all. He is warped and hideous. He's a liar and a cheat and a murderer."

He sat down on the couch. She went to the window and stood there with her back to him.

"Yesterday in the garden . . ." he said.

"Oh, Bert."

"Don't go, Lil," he said.

He was waiting for her to turn. Now as she stood there, so still and tense, she was like the others, back turned, face averted.

"People think I'm cold and unfeeling," he said. "I think you know that isn't true."

"I believe you're capable of . . . capable of very great emotion," she said. Still she didn't turn.

"I'm like other people," he said. "I'm . . ." He stopped and in a changed voice said, "How about some light?"

"I moved into the Inn today," she said. "I had the electric company turn off the power this afternoon."

He couldn't understand why she didn't turn.

"Did you hear what I said, Lil?"

"I think so" she said in a small voice. And now she turned. Her hands were clasped tight in front of her and her whole attitude expressed some sort of decision. "I believe you're just being kind. You'll never get Myra out of your mind."

"Myra was a bitch," he said.

And once having said it he continued compulsively, "I knew all about her and Milt."

"Yes," she said quietly as though what he had admitted was natural and completely acceptable. "But Bert, why did you pretend to Kelly . . . to everyone . . . that you thought there was nothing between them?"

"You must understand that, my dear. I think it's pretty obvious."

"You mean," she said carefully, "they might have suspected you, had there been a jealousy motive?"

He shrugged. "It was the better part of discretion."

"And you've always hated Milt!"

He hesitated a moment. "Yes," he finally said, "I think so. Always. Now that I know how you feel about him I can tell you this."

"It wasn't just because of Myra. It was all the others, too." Her voice was soft, almost kind.

"The others?"

"You never could understand how a worthless citizen like Milt was preferred by women to a distinguished character like yourself!"

Bert sat up straight.

"What's the matter with you?"

"You never could understand how Milt always won. Or why women sense the . . . the slug in you."

There were footsteps in the hall. Bert started to rise.

"Stay there," Lil said sharply. "There's more I have to say."

Hank Borden appeared in the doorway.

"That's all we can take tonight, Mrs. Richards," he said. "It's after six now. We'll get the rest of the stuff in the morning."

"Oh, Hank," she said, ". . . I didn't think you'd be through so early."

"The truck's full up."

She looked at Bert and then back to Hank and then said, "Well, then . . . yes. Yes, I suppose. Yes."

Her hesitant manner was so obvious that Borden said, "Anything wrong, Mrs. Richards?"

Before she could answer, Bert said in a light voice, "Mrs. Richards has been very upset, Hank. I'm sure she'll be all right now."

"I'm all right," Lil said. "You go ahead, Hank. Rita will give you hell if you're late to dinner."

"You ain't kidding," he said.

During the last part of the conversation Bert had walked to the window. He moved very carefully as though afraid to jostle a table or a chair in the darkness. He stood there where Lil had been, looking out to the lawn and the street. A street light had just been turned on, shining metallically through the bare limbs of the elm. He watched Hank stride down the sidewalk and hop into the truck beside his assistant. The truck drew off into the gathering gloom.

Bert touched the windowpane then looked at the finger as though he had been burned.

"So," he said wearily "You are the others."

She thought she'd misunderstood him. What he said made no sense.

"Even in the garden yesterday," he said, "you were laying a trap for me."

"Yes." Her voice shook with anger or fear or maybe both. "You couldn't really believe I would desert Milt. Even your warped ego couldn't really have accepted the fact that I thought Milt killed Myra. I knew . . . always . . . that he was innocent."

"Innocent!" he said harshly. "That filthy goat!"

"You thought you'd get rid of them both and you nearly succeeded!"

"Nearly?"

"And then in the end you thought you'd finally take away from him the one thing . . . the one person he loved . . . that's all you cared about. You had no emotion for me. It was simply to prove an insane point!"

"Insane?"

"For years your feeling for Milt has been psychopathic!"

"You forget," he said dryly, "Milt confessed."

"He confessed yesterday evening, a half hour after you had visited him. Somehow or other you convinced Milt that I had killed Myra. He confessed to protect me. You had to have that confession because you knew that despite the circumstantial evidence, Kelly was beginning to doubt that Milt had done it."

"You believe I killed Myra?"

"I know it," she said. "I think deep down I've known it all along. Ever since you came to warn me that Kelly had found out about Milt and Myra's meeting at the roadhouse . . . I knew you were lying when you said you believed there was nothing between them. It wasn't difficult to figure out why."

"No one will believe you."

"I don't know when you discovered about Milt and Myra. You must have known there was something before you married her. But you thought you had taken her away from Milt and that pleased you. Myra was quite a catch! But she married you for no other reason than that it was the sort of match she was expected to make . . . whatever her extra-curricular activities. She wouldn't let Milt alone when he tried to break it off after your marriage. And she held him by threatening to tell you everything. Milt considered you his best friend. He knew how it would hurt you. He tried to keep it from you and tried to break off with Myra. But she was a bitch if there ever was one. Even Milt's marriage to me made no difference. I imagine it took you some time to discover the truth and of course, I have no idea when you started to plan to kill her and implicate Milt as the murderer. But it was certainly planned in cold blood. You stole the wrench from Milt's toolroom . . . that must have been simple enough since you had the run of the house. You dug the grave in the woods. You arranged to have that business appointment in New York on the day you knew Milt was meeting her at the Golden Eagle. . . . How you discovered he was meeting her isn't important . . . probably you listened at one of the telephone extensions."

"You've figured it out fairly well," he said. "But who will believe you?"

"It's always puzzled me," she said, "what there was about you that revolted me even when I used to feel guilty about it. It's something inhuman about you."

To her surprise, he didn't respond in anger. Instead: "You see . . . My mother . . . Well, people here can tell you about her. She was beautiful and cold and she hated me because she had never wanted a child. As a child, I was always knocking on walls of ice. I had dreams in which the faces of people were always averted. Milt had all the faces turned towards him. Even as a kid he seemed to attract love. Why do I tell you this?"

"Don't," she said. "I don't want to hear! Did you think you could attract love through murder?"

He sighed. "Perhaps. I don't know. I bought an artist's smock and rubber gloves the day I drove to town for my business appointment. I left the club at eight, drove back fast. I had to be sure no one else was there with her so I walked in across the terrace and saw her on the sofa in that low-cut green thing they found her in. She looked like a Broadway tramp. She looked up

from her book and with that fake smile of hers, said, 'Darling! What fun! You're home so early!'

" 'I've got a surprise for you, Myra.'

"I went back to the car, put on the smock and the rubber gloves and took Milt's wrench from the rear. Then I returned to Myra . . ."

He shrugged. Easily he started to move towards Lil.

"Don't come near me!" she cried. "You don't seem aware of the consequences. I'm going to Kelly and . . ."

"So you've not confided in him?"

"No," she said. And then quickly, her voice rising, "Why?"

"I'm due at the Wilsons for dinner in a few minutes," he said. "I don't want to be late. I haven't much time."

"Time?" She looked over her shoulder into the black hall. "Bert! You're not that much of a fool. The furniture men saw you here."

"You fell down the steps after I left. You broke your neck."

With a sob of fear she stumbled out into the dark hall. She got to the front door, actually had the knob half turned before he caught her from behind. His arm closed around her neck and a hand covered her mouth. He drew her back powerfully. When she realized he was dragging her towards the kitchen she stopped fighting. It was all over now.

Bert kicked open the kitchen door and stepped across the threshold.

The room was suddenly ablaze with light. He let go of Lil and stood there. Lil staggered back against the wall. Through sobs, she cried, "I told you so, Pete! I told you I'd trap him if you gave me the chance."

Kelly, deathly pale, part of his world destroyed, said, "Milt will be free this evening."

Bert regarded the other men in the room with remote indifference.

"Don't try to escape," Kelly said. He flushed as though ashamed of the melodramatic phrase.

Except for Lil's sobbing, there was no sound. Then Kelly cleared his throat. He looked like a man who had sustained a deep personal loss.

"Well, Bert. . . ."

"Don't call me that," Bert said coldly. "You presume on a friendship that existed only in your mind."

Kelly's head went back as though he had been slapped.

"Come on!" he said harshly.

The men closed in on Bert. He turned a blank empty face to Lil and said, "It's as it's always been. In the end Milt wins!"

—Continued from Back Cover

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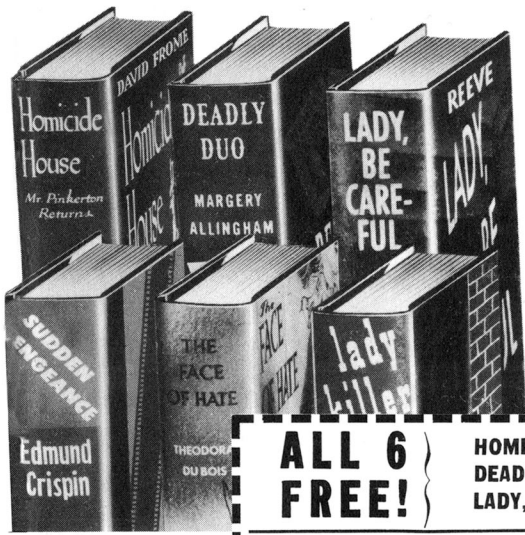

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